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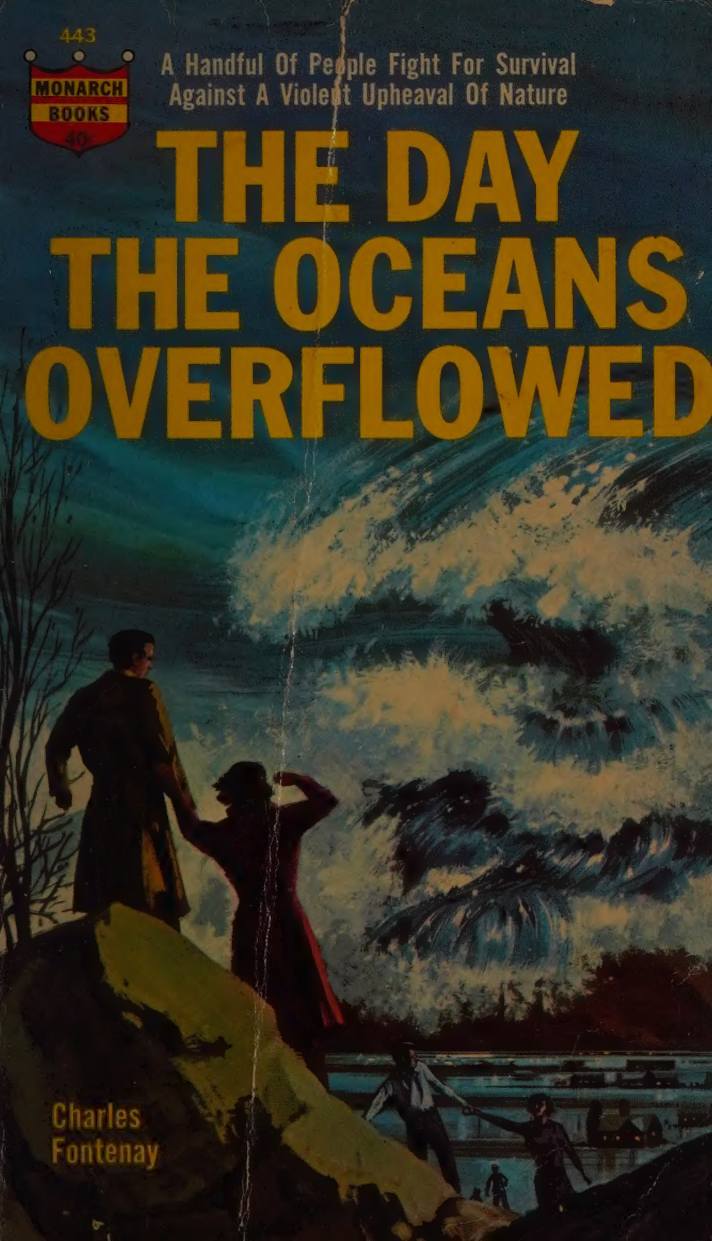
A Handful Of People Fight For Survival Against A Violent Upheaval Of Nature

THE DAY THE OCEANS OVERFLOWED



Charles Fontenay

A WAVE OF DESTRUCTION

High on a lonely hill in North Carolina, scientist Brand Caravel turned up the radio in an effort to quiet Ashley's fears. A crisp voice was saying: ". . . rain seems to have lifted. We know we can't get out now, unless this building—the Empire State—manages to stand through the tidal wave."

"That's New York you've got!" Ashley exclaimed, leaning forward.

The radio contact went on: "There's something sparkling out there across the bay—" A gasp followed, then a shout. "My God, it's the wave! The ocean's rolling over Brooklyn like a sandspit!

"I can't see anything outside any more . . . the floor is shuddering now. There went the lights! The building's swaying! We aren't going to make it—!" Abruptly there was silence.

Then another radio voice spoke. "Our contact has been broken with New York. We don't know, of course, that the building collapsed . . ."

"He knows," said Brand somberly. "And so do we."

AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Charles Fontenay was born in Sao Paulo, Brazil, moved to America during his early years and attended school in Union City, Tenn. He now makes his home in Madison, Tenn.

He was a surveyor and a dry goods clerk before going into the newspaper field where he was city editor of the Union City DAILY MESSENGER, an editor with the Associated Press and, more recently, a reporter and assistant city editor of the Nashville TENNESSEAN.

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KEY AW-6

A Science Fiction Novel

THE DAY THE OCEANS OVERFLOWED

Charles Fontenay

MONARCH BOOKS, INC.

Derby, Connecticut

THE DAY THE OCEANS OVERFLOWED

A Monarch Books Science Fiction Novel

Published in May, 1964

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Cover Painting by Ralph Brillhart

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1 • • •

BRAND CARAVEL stood on the ice, under the interweaving Northern lights, and reflected on the advantages and disadvantages of participation in the most gigantic scientific experiment since man landed on the moon.

The lights of the complex of buildings, some little distance behind him, faintly etched his shadow on the snow. Ahead of him, perhaps a quarter of a mile farther on, the great bulk of the reactor block loomed, a darker shadow against the dim sky, partly outlined by half a dozen glowing red lights.

Because of the silent reaction going on in that dark block, a decade from now grass and young trees would be growing in this bleak spot near the northeastern tip of Ellesmere Island. Perhaps there would be a town near here, and trading vessels would be plying the channel to nearby Greenland.

Even now the ice was melting, imperceptibly but inexorably, under his feet.

A quarter of a world away, just as imperceptibly, just as inexorably, the waters were beginning to rise on the beaches where he had built sand castles as a boy. His childhood friends and neighbors were leisurely planning the eventual exodus from the yards and playgrounds he had roamed, from the streets he had walked, from the buildings he knew.

This was one of the disadvantages of "Project People"—that all the town and countryside he had known when he was growing up would be submerged and become the haunted playground of fishes. It saddened him. It made him feel as he had felt once when he had seen the wreckers razing a picturesque old nineteenth-century mansion to make room for a parking lot.

The other big disadvantage was less sentimental. It was that he was tired of nothing but snow and ice and the

crisp efficiency of insulated buildings, after two years in the Arctic, well north of Canada. He would like to see flowers and trees and grass again, long before Project People brought them here.

The one big advantage, of course, that cut through all disadvantages of any kind, was that more land would be made livable by freeing the polar regions from ice than would be submerged along the world's seacoasts by the resultant hundred-foot rise in the ocean level.

The "hot lines" were invisible in the snow, radiating from the reactor block and crisscrossing like a giant spider web, but Brand felt almost as though he could detect the steady radiation of heat from them. They covered both poles of the world now, these hot lines, like a warm hairnet over the icecaps.

Brand stood there, a Viking from the south challenging the frozen north. Then he turned away from the Aurora Borealis and went back to the Geology Building. A plaque beside its heavy door said: *"Project PEOPLE, U.S.A., Station 48, Building L-23."* The letters of the project designation stood for "Polar Extension of Population Locale."

He went to his office. It was night outside, but that Arctic night had lasted two months now, and by the clock it was "daytime" and working hours for Brand.

The office was a small one, with one door into the corridor, through which Brand had just walked, and another into the big geological workroom. The workroom was ringed with such small offices, one for each of Team 48-L-28-5, so the team members could have privacy and quiet for individual work. In one corner was a big filing cabinet, on the other was his desk. On it, amid stacks of papers, a small calendar was turned to November, 1997. Beside it, a small red light was glowing on his communication recorder.

Brand switched the recorder on. A taped voice issued from it: "Caravel, please bring your File A to my office. Arthur Ryder."

Brand started guiltily. Colonel Ryder was head of Subproject 48, coordinator of all its teams, overteams and sections. Brand had been outside for only ten minutes, but Ryder might be waiting impatiently.

He flicked the switch, dialed the colonel's office code and said into the speaker: "Brand Caravel reporting. I'll be right in, sir."

He slipped out of his heavy outdoor clothing. The muscular build won from boyhood swimming and college football added to the strong face, deep blue eyes and close-cropped red-gold hair to strengthen the impression of a Viking.

Brand paused long enough to pull a straight pipe with a well-carboned bowl from his back pocket, fill it from the humidor on his desk and light it. Then he grabbed the thick file from the cabinet and hurried down the corridor.

Ryder, a gray-haired officer with a seamed face and alert eyes, was sipping coffee when Brand entered. The colonel's uniform shirt was unbuttoned halfway to his waist, and his polished cavalry boots were propped on the edge of the desk. Ryder was an easygoing, rough and ready man, with a strong sense of discipline but little liking for formality.

"Have some coffee, Caravel," he said, waving at a dispenser in a corner of the big office. Brand drew a cup, and, on invitation, sat down a little uneasily in a chair opposite the colonel. Ryder plunged into his subject immediately.

"Station One informs me that the equation contained in your last report is unique," he said. "It has not turned up anywhere else. I assume that means not only from none of the American stations, but from none of the projects of the other nations either."

He paused and looked at Brand. Brand waited politely.

"It could be quite important," said Ryder. "Have you analyzed its significance yet?"

"No, sir," replied Brand. "I've run all the basic information through the computers several times, and from several different aspects, but I always come out with this equation. I haven't been able to break down the result of the equation yet, and I haven't figured out any way of feeding it to the computer to get a better insight."

Ryder frowned thoughtfully, drummed his fingers on his desk and took a sip of coffee.

"It could be damned important," he said. "I don't know how, of course, but I just have a feeling about it. Section C has come up with an unknown factor—not just here, but repeated in Section C throughout the project."

Brand sat up a little straighter. Section C was the operational heart of Project People: the hydrogen reaction control section.

"The reaction quotient is building up faster than had been computed," said Ryder, "and the build-up is accelerating."

"How could that be?" asked Brand. "Of course, I'm not familiar with C computations, sir, but the computers wouldn't miscalculate the build-up, would they?"

"Not if they had all the information, because the operation schedule was thoroughly rechecked. The most logical place for the unknown factor to be is in the characteristics of blatherskite."

Brand nodded at this reference to the catalyst moon-metal used in the reactors and hot lines.

"We're checking that out, of course, but there may be some connection with your equation. I don't know what it could be, but it's coincidental that the two breaks in the logical chain should occur at this time in apparently unrelated areas."

"Have the rods been pushed on the reactors?" asked Brand with some concern. The project had been in actual operation for only about a month.

Ryder shook his head.

"There's no immediate danger," he said. "The curve of build-up acceleration gives us another month before the explosion level is reached. We may find the cause of it long before that, and this project is too important to interrupt unless we have to."

Again Brand nodded. With a population of five billion packing the seacoast megalopolises and crowding ever more densely into the inland areas, the world was desperately in need of the polar regions and adjacent lands for expansion. Even on the present schedule of Project People, there would be many millions more people in the world before they could start settling the newly habitable lands at the poles.

"I had hoped you might have some idea of the meaning of your equation by now," said Ryder. "Since you don't, and since you're due to leave on your biennial rotation to the States day after tomorrow, I want to turn it over to all of Section L for study."

"Why, the whole section has had it available since I ran across it, sir."

"Here in Forty-eight, of course," said Ryder, somewhat impatiently. "I know that. But I want it disseminated to L throughout the project. Station One will decide whether it

goes to the other participating nations, too. But if it has any relation to the situation in C, we can't wait until you get back to find out what it means."

"I can put off my rotation, Colonel Ryder."

"I don't want you to. The orders from Section H are extremely strict, because of the psychological factor involved in Arctic service. I see no reason to ask for a waiver in your case, because there are plenty of able men in Section L throughout the project to study the equation while you're gone."

"If you say so, sir. I hate to leave it though. You can understand that I have a personal interest in it."

"Certainly I can. So I'm going to give you permission to take your file with you and study it while you're on rotation, if you wish, as soon as I've had some copies faxed for distribution. Then, if you get any ideas, you can relay them back to us."

Ryder dropped his booted feet from the desk, stood up and held out his hand.

"Have a good time in the States, Caravel," he said heartily.

Brand arose, shook hands with the colonel and went out of the office, leaving File A on Ryder's desk. Outside, he paused to relight his own pipe, then walked thoughtfully on down the corridor.

A quarter of a world away, in that section of the East Coast megalopolis called New Argos, where Brand had grown up, Craig Blackthorne stared out the picture window of his living room and frowned. Beyond the neatly mowed lawn, Jimmy Haggard walked down the tree-shaded sidewalk in khaki shorts, whistling loudly and swinging a sheathed hand ax loosely.

"I do not understand," said Craig with some asperity, "how a grown man can bring himself to trot around without any pants on, and lead a completely useless life."

Harriet Blackthorne, graying but still slim and attractive, came to his side and peered out the window. Jimmy was just turning the corner, and a moment later vanished from view.

"He doesn't lead a useless life," she protested mildly. "If some young men didn't take an interest in the boy scouts, there wouldn't be any, and you certainly wouldn't say the boy scouts aren't a good thing, would you?"

Craig snorted. He removed his rimless spectacles and polished them with his handkerchief as he peered at his wife and prepared to pontificate.

"The boy scouts are fine," he conceded. "But I'd rather an overgrown boy scout didn't take such a serious interest in my daughter. Besides, the young man is obviously soft in the head, wearing shorts at this time of year—even in this climate."

He turned away abruptly and went back to his chair. Settling in it, he put his spectacles back on and fixed his eyes on the news analysis program coming from the television set.

"Population, even more than war, has become the big problem of our time," said the bespectacled announcer on the screen. "The two big nations which formerly were most likely to plunge the world into war are taking the lead in solving the population problem without a brutal war."

The camera shifted to two polar maps of the world and the announcer's pointer intruded, touching one of them near the South Pole.

"They plan to open up an entire new continent at the southern end of the world, as well as ice-covered lands to the north," said the invisible announcer, his pointer moving vaguely over the Southern Hemisphere map.

"They propose to do it by a controlled application of atomic power, releasing slow heat instead of the destructive blasts of explosions. This heat will melt the snow and ice of the polar regions and warm their atmospheres over a period estimated at about ten years. Then these areas can be settled and siphon off a large portion of the population that is bursting the seams of the world's cities."

A sudden, fragrant breeze swept into the living room, announcing the presence of Camilla, the twenty-year-old daughter of the Blackthorne family. Blithely ignoring her father's preoccupation with the program, she ruffled his gray hair and kissed him on the cheek.

"I'm off on my date," she said.

Craig straightened in his chair and removed his glasses to peer at her. She smiled back at him, slender, blue-eyed, hair the color of ripe corn—one of the major candidates for queen of the Christmas Ball at New Argos College this year.

"You're not going to be seen with him until he puts some pants on!" Craig exclaimed.

Camilla laughed musically.

"I don't have a date with Jimmy tonight," she replied. "He's getting ready for that camporee, or whatever it is, that Chris was going on. Ash Garland's on his way over to pick me up. We're going dancing at the country club."

Craig snorted and subsided. He was not especially fond of young Ashley Garland personally, but at least Ashley was solid and substantial, economically and socially.

A blue turbo-convertible slid up to the curb outside, and the bespectacled young man in it honked loudly. Camilla, with a wave, breezed through the front door. Craig sighed and turned back to the set.

"Before such a project could be practical," the unseen announcer was saying, "scientists had to solve the problem of a slow hydrogen reaction. There isn't enough uranium in the world for the job. Obviously, the problem was solved, or Project People would not have started a month ago."

2 • • •

Brand Caravel sat in his corner room in the Seabreeze Hotel in New Argos and stared out thoughtfully at the city lights. There was a big sign across the expressway, that flashed on and off persistently:

"Why wait for the government? Garland Land Company will resettle you at highest prices NOW."

Brand looked back at the piece of paper in his hand. It was the equation, which he had brought with him from the Arctic.

The equation covered most of a page. Brand had been over it so many times, trying to decipher its full meaning, that he knew on sight the meaning of the majority of the factors, but there were two or three unknowns that still eluded him. They eluded the computers, too: the computers could reproduce the equation from his initial information, but their reaction to efforts to interpret the equation was always "insufficient data."

Brand felt intuitively that the equation was of the highest importance. Its meaning was on the tip of his mind, but he could not reach it.

He looked out the window again, just as the sign flashed on. He grimaced, half amused, half irritated.

One of these signs had been the first thing that caught his eye when he landed at the New Argos heliport the day before: *"Avoid the rush inland. Help the government in its gigantic task of resettlement. Garland Land Company offers you nearest to government prices for your home, your business, your land."* Another had blazed out beside the expressway on the way into the city: *"Don't be forced to take what the others have left when you go inland. See Garland Land Company now."*

Someone, obviously, was already out for some extensive profiteering, with Project People barely under way. It was assured and well publicized that the government would deal generously with those displaced from the coast by the rise in sea level—the cost of resettlement would run into the billions of dollars, especially on the heavily settled and industrialized Northeastern and Western coasts of the United States. But this Garland Land Company evidently was one of those willing to play on the apprehension or ignorance of the coastal inhabitants who did not wish to wait for the government deadline. If the company could buy now, it could hold onto the land for a substantial profit when the government repurchased it.

Brand's childhood home had been sold when his parents were killed in a plane crash while he was in college. He neither desired nor could afford to spend his three months' vacation in the hotel. He picked up his newspaper, which he had bought in the lobby after supper in the hotel dining room.

When he unfolded the paper, the black headlines across the top said: "ARCTIC MELTING MOVING FASTER." Startled, he plunged into the news story below it.

The story was written in an optimistic vein. It told how the radioactive network at both poles was "heating up" faster than scientists had expected. Therefore the ice would melt faster, and people could begin settling the areas sooner.

Brand knew the writer whose by-line topped the story. He was not ignorant of his science. Brand realized, then, that the man must be reflecting optimism which had been represented to him deliberately by the top officials of Proj-

ect People; and such deliberate optimism—unjustified to such an extent, as Brand knew—must be covering up something.

The story's optimism was not unmitigated. Farther down, it pointed out that the radioactive build-up, if unchecked, would in another two weeks touch off the most massive hydrogen explosion the world had ever experienced; but, before the danger point was reached, rods would be pushed in the reactor centers to halt the entire project if necessary.

The peculiar aspect of the whole matter was that the project officials had decided to make it public. It obviously meant that they had not determined what was causing the build-up of the hydrogen reaction or they would have said so; and it probably meant that they were preparing the public, just in case the project had to be interrupted.

And that "two weeks"—the curve of acceleration for the build-up had risen sharply in the less than a week since he had left the Arctic, if Ryder had been anywhere near accurate in his casual "another month" statement.

Puzzled and a little disturbed, Brand turned to the classified advertising section of the newspaper, to look for an apartment.

A good many of the ads stood out from the rest, for they were printed in red type. They caught the eye at once. Brand discovered quickly that all of them were advertisements of a single enterprising firm and, moreover, one with which he had become swiftly familiar: Garland Land Company. A few were the same sort of advertisements that had appeared on the signboards, but most of them were offering land, buildings, offices and homes for rent or lease.

Brand detected the continuation of the pattern at once. Taking advantage of the fact that all of this area must be evacuated within the next decade, this company was buying everything it could at reduced prices, to receive more than an ample return from the government when the orderly schedule called for evacuation from each successive strip of the coastal area. In the meantime, the company was picking up an extra profit on its purchases by renting them or leasing them for short terms, ranging from a month to several years.

Brand was forced, reluctantly, to admire such brazen business perspicacity. He also recognized that he was more likely to find what he wanted from a company with such extensive dealings in property than by searching at random.

On an outside chance, he looked up the Garland Land Company in the directory and dialed the number.

Sure enough, the company was not taking the chance of missing an impulsive decision to sell after office hours. There was a secretary there. And, sure enough, a brief search of her files discovered just the sort of apartment Brand was seeking, at a reasonable rate.

Brand moved into the apartment the next day. It was in a good residential section of New Argos, not very far from his old home. It was a spacious first-floor apartment, furnished, with its own iron-railed porch, in a three-story building containing half a dozen such apartments. An inquisitive neighbor across the hall, who appeared to watch Brand move his luggage in, informed Brand that four of the other five apartments were occupied, all of them by New Argos people who had sold out to Garland Land Company and were renting until they could make arrangements to move inland.

Moving in and getting settled was a simple matter for someone with as light a load of luggage as Brand carried. By midafternoon, he was thinking in terms of another need that faced him during the next three months: companionship.

His little black address book was somewhat out of date by now. The first two numbers he called brought identical results: the young ladies had married and moved away from home while he was in the Arctic.

On the third try, he was glad the first two had failed. He remembered Camilla Blackthorne pleasantly. Five years younger than he, she had been a good dancer and a lot of fun on a date. She was there, and she came to the telephone.

When he asked for a date that evening, she hesitated.

"Well . . . I'd already made a date for this evening. But why don't you come on over anyway, Brand?"

He was taken aback.

"That wouldn't be so good, would it?" he asked.

"Oh, Jimmy wouldn't mind. We'd probably stay home anyway. And I'm anxious to see you again. Couldn't you just think of it as sort of a visit, instead of a date, this time?"

"Well, I do want to see you again, Cam. I'll be over."

He went for supper with the family. Camilla was as he remembered her, blue-eyed and yellow-haired, with a wonderful figure that was now a little more mature. He knew

her parents, too, and her little brother, fourteen-year-old Chris.

Jimmy Haggard arrived for his date after supper. When Brand was introduced to Jimmy, he remembered him as a quiet boy who had been in the class behind him in high school. The description of "a nice young man" fit Jimmy perfectly now: boyish in face and form, with preoccupied brown eyes and wispy hair that would not stay combed properly.

It turned out, as Camilla had suggested, to be a visit rather than a date. Camilla's father, Craig Blackthorne, virtually took Brand over in the evening's conversation, for Craig was intensely interested in Project People.

"It's going to have a greater impact on me and my family than on a great many people," said Craig, waving his rimless spectacles at Brand for emphasis, "because my family has lived in this same area for six generations. That's a long time. Now we're going to have to see all of this territory flooded by the ocean and move inland."

"You can still live on the coast, Mr. Blackthorne," said Brand. "The melting of the ice and snow at the poles will raise sea level only a little more than a hundred feet. We've already figured out what the new coastline is going to be, very accurately—that's part of the work I'm doing with the project—and if you find a place about a hundred miles inland, you'll be on the new seacoast."

"Well, of course ten years in the future is a respectable time," said Craig, "but it's a little hard for a man my age to realize that after that time he's going to be uprooted and the sea will flood in over this house."

"It's neither that simple nor that dramatic," said Brand, smiling and pulling out his pipe. "This close to the beach, you won't have anything like ten years. It will be nearer two or three. And the ocean won't flood in suddenly. It's rising already, if our calculations are right, and it will rise imperceptibly—about a third of an inch a day—over the next decade."

"Tonight's paper said it's being speeded up, didn't it, Craig?" asked Mrs. Blackthorne.

"That's right," said Craig. "Something about the hydrogen reaction moving faster than they had expected. It is a hydrogen reaction that's being used, isn't it? I always thought it couldn't be controlled, like the uranium reaction can."

"That was a major problem until we landed on the moon," said Brand. "We solved it with blatherskite."

"Blatherskite?"

Brand smiled, holding his lighter to his pipe and puffing.

"It's a moon metal, which isn't found on earth," he said. "The story is that it got its name because it was discovered by a talkative Irishman. At any rate, it serves as a sort of catalyst in a hydrogen reaction."

"How do you mean, catalyst?" asked Jimmy. Jimmy's nose quivered slightly when he talked.

"Well," said Brand, "to make the hydrogen bomb operative, you had to have a uranium bomb as a trigger. Otherwise, you couldn't get the hydrogen to combine in a reaction. This is why we couldn't get a 'quiet,' or merely power-producing, hydrogren reaction before—only an explosion.

"But blatherskite, somehow, acts as a catalyst. In a way, it's like Uranium 235—you have to have a certain concentration of it before it has any effect. But if you have that minimum concentration, hydrogen fusion occurs in a slow, steady reaction at its surface.

"Another characteristic of blatherskite is that, if you have an adequate concentration, any strand of the metal, no matter how small, which has a physical connection with that concentration will catalyze the hydrogen fusion reaction. That's how we constructed our network at the poles. We have reactor centers, which contain concentrations of blatherskite sufficient to trigger the reactions; and from these centers networks of blatherskite wires stretch over the snow and ice. The hydrogen fusion goes on along these wires, as well as in the reactor centers."

"What's this danger of an explosion that was mentioned in the newspaper?" asked Craig.

"Any time your hydrogen fusion reaction reaches a certain level, there'll be an explosion, just as in the case of U-235 fission," explained Brand. "This isn't the area of Project People that I have any authoritative knowledge about, but it seems that there's a feedback effect involved in the use of blatherskite for a hydrogen reaction. The longer it goes on, continuously, the more efficient it gets.

"Of course, the most 'efficient' hydrogen reaction is an explosion. In their use of blatherskite so far, it has always reached a certain point and leveled off, but they've never had so much of it connected together in a single system

before. That's probably involved in this unexpectedly fast build-up, and that's why they may have to interrupt the project."

"For how long?" asked Craig, his face brightening at the thought of delay in leaving New Argos.

"Thirty seconds."

"Thirty seconds?"

"That's right," said Brand. "The previous experience with blatherskite has been that, if they stop the hydrogen reaction even for an instant, when it starts again it starts at its initial low level."

"That's not much of an interruption," said Craig. He put his spectacles back on and looked at his wristwatch. "It's time for the ten o'clock news. Let's see if they have any more to say about what was in the paper."

He switched on the television set, and all of them gathered around the screen.

The news announcer was already beginning when the picture came on, looking out at his audience and shuffling some papers.

"There has been an important development in the new turn of events taken by the world's greatest scientific experiment—Project People," said the announcer dramatically. "It has been decided that the project should be interrupted temporarily! For details, we take you directly to the headquarters of the American sector in northern Alaska."

The picture faded to another announcer, this one in uniform. Behind him was another screen, covering the entire wall, obviously depicting a different area of the project. On it, suited and helmeted men were working busily, and Brand recognized the scene.

"That activity behind him on the big screen is in one of the reactor centers," he told the others.

Superimposed on the back screen was a big dial, with figures around its edge running from zero to 100. A red band on the dial extended from 90 to 100. Its pointer hovered just below 80.

"This is Station One, Project for Polar Extension of Population Locale," said the uniformed announcer. "Our dial—" he indicated it with a pointer—"shows the extent to which the hydrogen reaction integral to the project has built up. The figure '100' is the point of explosion, and the build-up toward it has proceeded faster than expected. Our

computers tell us that if it were to remain unchecked the explosion point at the present rate of acceleration would be reached in less than a week."

Brand started. The newspaper story, surely written no earlier than the previous night, had given a two weeks' grace period. The acceleration curve of the build-up must be swinging up violently.

"For this reason," said the announcer, "it has been determined that the hydrogen reaction should be interrupted for one minute. When it is reinstituted at the end of that time, it will start at its initial level, just above zero on the dial, and build back up very slowly."

He backed out of the field of vision, leaving only the background screen and the dial. The helmeted men on the screen threw the switches, one after the other, that thrust in the damper rods. The needle on the dial fell swiftly back to zero.

The scene remained on the television screen, the men lounging as they waited for the minute recess to expire. Off-screen, the announcer explained:

"If this unexpectedly swift build-up of the reaction repeats itself, project authorities have already decided what steps to take. An automatic interrupter system will be installed on all reactor units, so that they will be switched off for one full minute whenever they reach the 65 stage. This will give ample time for emergency action in breaking off the reaction in case something should go wrong with the automatic system."

The men on the screen stirred to activity and began opening switches again. The announcer stepped back into view, his pointer extended toward the dial.

The entire television screen went blank and white.

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" exclaimed Craig, jumping up. "What a time for the set to go out!"

But it hadn't. Before Craig could reach the set to fiddle with the dials, the local announcer came on.

"I'm sorry, but our transmission from the project headquarters in Alaska has been interrupted," he said. "We shall re-establish contact as quickly as possible. In the meantime, here are the latest sports results."

The group in the Blackthorne home broke out into conversation, everyone asking Brand questions at once. He answered them automatically, hardly hearing them. He was considerably disturbed.

It must have been an optical illusion, but it seemed to him that in that last fraction of a second before the screen went blank the needle on the big dial had not hovered at zero, as it should. It had leaped back around the dial toward the red zone.

3 • • •

THEY SAT BESIDE THE TELEVISION SET, talking, keeping half an eye on it. There was a series of local musical programs, interrupted by commercials and inconsequential news bulletins. Periodically, the local announcer explained that unsuccessful attempts still were being made to re-establish contact with Project People, and that no further news had been relayed from the polar area along normal news channels.

About eleven o'clock, Craig arose and switched off the set.

"I'd hoped to hear more about what happened up there, but I suppose the newspaper will have it in the morning," he said.

There was a knock on the front door. Camilla went and returned with a newcomer. This was a well-dressed, dark-haired young man with horn-rimmed spectacles, whom Camilla introduced to Brand as Ashley Garland.

"I didn't intend to break in on anything," apologized Ashley, pushing back a lank forelock which had a tendency to fall over his forehead. "I just thought you might want to go out dancing for a while, Cam."

Jimmy exhibited a certain amount of antagonism.

"I think if Cam wanted to go dancing, I could take care of it," he said, his nose twitching.

"I didn't know you danced, Haggard," said Ashley, in a patronizing tone. "Besides, I thought you went to bed earlier than this."

Craig frowned, peering over his spectacles at the two young men. Camilla laughed, but prevented any further exchange.

"You know I never have two dates the same evening, Ash," she reproved, seemingly unaware of any inconsistency. "Besides, I have to get up early in the morning and help mother organize her fashion show."

Brand tapped the ashes from his pipe into a large ash-tray and arose.

"That probably isn't a hint, but I'd better be going," he said. "I'd like to call you again, Cam."

"Please do," she said, smiling at him.

"I have to go, too," said Jimmy. "I have to take the boys out on a camporee in the morning."

"I'll give you fellows a lift," offered Ashley. "I have my car."

Jimmy refused, observing that he lived only a block away, but Brand accepted. When they left the house, they got into a long black limousine parked at the curb.

"Quite an automobile you have here," remarked Brand.

"This is the family car," said Ashley. "I have a convertible, but it's in the shop. Since my parents went to Florida for the winter, I'm driving this until I get mine back."

"I've seen the name 'Garland' quite a bit since I've been in town," said Brand. "You don't have any connection with Garland Land Company, do you?"

"It belongs to my father. I'm vice president in charge of the rentals and lease operations."

"Then you're my landlord!" exclaimed Brand.

"Well, I'm always glad to meet anyone who's helping to swell the company coffers," said Ashley with a laugh. "How about going somewhere and having a drink together?"

"Suits me," said Brand. "It's a little early for bedtime. Where can we go?"

"The country club's best at this time of night. The city night clubs have to close their bars at midnight, and unless you have your own with you it gets pretty grim."

Ashley swung the big turbo-limousine onto the expressway, and it purred swiftly out above the quiet suburbs and into the dark countryside.

The night had been clear when Brand went to the Blackthorne home, and the stars had shone frostily in the sky. Now the sky was overcast, and the lights of New Argos were reflected redly from roiling clouds moving swiftly at a low level. The wind was up, but it was not

steady. It came in fitful, violent gusts, and occasionally there was a sharp spatter of rain on the windshield.

It took them thirty minutes to reach the county club. It was a sprawling building, blazing with lights, at the top of a hill about half a mile off the expressway. Ashley swung the big car onto a side road to reach its entrance.

They found a table in a corner and lingered for about two hours over their drinks, listening to a quiet orchestra and getting acquainted. Ashley was quite interested in Brand's work with Project People, and Brand found himself repeating much of what he had told the Blackthornes. He found a good deal to like about Ashley, but there was a streak of callousness in the young man, which occasionally flashed to the surface and always gave Brand a little shock when it did.

The Garland Land Company, Brand learned, was only a subsidiary enterprise of Ashley's father, whose major business interest was a varied manufacturing complex. The land company had been formed only after the announcement of Project People, and dealt only in property in the coastal strip which was to be flooded.

"It's smart business practice, I'll admit," said Brand, "but isn't it profiteering at the expense of people who are going to be displaced from their homes and businesses?"

"It all depends on the way you look at it," replied Ashley with a slightly superior smile "If they don't want to sell to us, they don't have to. They can hold onto their property until the government is ready to buy it. We just give them the opportunity to get an earlier start, if they want to."

"For a profit to you."

"Certainly. What's wrong with that? That's the essence of business anyhow: convenience for the buyer in return for a profit for the seller. Reversed, in this case, of course.

"Brand, there are plenty of stupid people who are frightened or impatient at the prospect of flooding, who not only don't begrudge us our profit but thank us for helping them. Some other smart businessman would do it if we didn't; plenty of others are trying, as it is."

He saw Brand's dubious expression and smiled the slightly superior smile again.

"You're thinking that it's not fair to take advantage of what is a disaster to these people," said Ashley. "In the first place, you're oversentimental, because there's nothing

secret about the fact that they'll lose money by not waiting for the government. In the second place, my friend, the principle of making money is to be smarter than the other fellow."

The conversation turned to the Blackthorne family, and Ashley, with disconcerting directness, sought to learn Brand's attitude toward Camilla.

"It would be hard to say yet," replied Brand with a smile. "After all, tonight's the first time I've seen Cam in a couple of years. I enjoyed dating her then."

"I intend to marry her," said Ashley, flatly and seriously.

"But, obviously, you're not engaged yet," said Brand, still smiling.

"You're referring to her dating Jimmy. That rattlebrain! He'll never amount to anything. Her father won't let her get serious about him."

"I'd think Cam could make up her own mind," said Brand carelessly.

Ashley measured him with a glance.

"You have three months before going back to the Arctic, and I have from now on," he challenged, and they left it at that.

On their way back to the city from the country club, they were surprised to see the lights of an almost continuous double line of cars on the other side of the expressway, going away from town. A few people could be seen walking along the shoulder of the road.

"I've never seen traffic so heavy this early in the morning," said Ashley. "I wonder what's up?"

"I don't know," said Brand. "It's pretty light over here."

As they turned off the expressway downtown, a police cruiser equipped with a loudspeaker moved slowly down the street past them.

"Attention, everyone!" blared the amplifier at full power. "Attention, everyone! Please turn to your favorite station on your radio or television set for instructions. This is urgent! Attention, everyone!"

"What the devil?" muttered Ashley and punched on the car radio. After a moment's warm-up, a crisp, urgent voice came in strongly:

"Repeating . . . repeating . . . This is Megalopolis Fourteen Civil Defense. Attention, please, everyone! There has been an accident involving both polar projects. As a result,

evacuation of the seacoast area is imperative immediately.

"I repeat: evacuation of the seacoast area is imperative immediately. This area will be flooded violently within the next two or three days.

"There is no need for panic. The precise period before violent flooding occurs is now being calculated, but there will be ample time for everyone to reach safety if evacuation is orderly.

"Please do not attempt to carry possessions with you. Please leave immediately by the most convenient method of transportation. Please awaken your neighbors and notify them that an emergency exists. Please make room for neighbors, friends and even strangers, if you have room in your personal transportation.

"All public transportation facilities . . ."

The two men stared at each other in the dimness of the moving automobile as the announcer droned on, listing departure points for buses and helicopters, outlining government plans to care for refugees inland, naming the best escape routes for each sector of the Megalopolis XIV area, which included New Argos.

"There's only one project accident that could flood the seacoast suddenly, and that's explosion," said Brand somberly. "All the project personnel at the poles are dead. All of my friends . . ."

4 • • •

"YOU'RE CONNECTED WITH THAT PROJECT, Caravel," said Ashley. "What's happened? How could there be an explosion?"

"I can't be sure, of course," said Brand slowly. "I don't even like to think about it, but I think the hydrogen reaction, instead of falling back to normal when they shut it off and turned it back on again, jumped suddenly to the explosion point over the entire area of Project People. My God!"

They were inching their way in the limousine through downtown streets that were becoming increasingly crowded. Street traffic lights had been turned off, and policemen were trying to direct traffic at the major intersections, but the jam was swiftly becoming serious. For some reason, the sidewalks were crowded with pedestrians, and others kept coming out of buildings.

"But why would that affect us down here?" persisted Ashley, swinging the big car into a side street, which for a few minutes gave them an almost clear run. "Wouldn't it just stop the project?"

"No. All the ice and snow at both poles would be melted and vaporized at once, instead of over a period of years. A tremendous amount of water would be added to the ocean level all at once, particularly in the south polar area. This 'violent flooding' they're talking about can only mean a tidal wave moving in this direction from the pole—and that means everybody's got to get away from the coast in a hurry."

"Well, we won't have to go very far inland to get out of the way here," said Ashley calmly. "My company has maps showing the maximum rise of the water all through here, for land-buying purposes, and I've studied them any number of times. Two hours' drive, at most, will get us off the coastal plain at this point."

"It's not going to be that simple, even if we didn't have the complication of heavy traffic," said Brand. "The final water level will be only about a hundred feet higher than it is now, true enough. But this tidal wave will be much higher, and we'll have to get beyond its reach. We're going to have to go pretty far inland—at least to Raleigh, and Durham would be safer."

"How much time do we have?"

"I don't know," said Brand. "I doubt that the authorities know, or they'd be giving some idea over the air. Maybe twenty-four hours. Maybe two or three days. But that's an awful lot of water to be dumped into one area of the ocean all at once."

"In that case, we'd better get started," said Ashley logically.

"We? Thanks for including me."

Ashley's sardonic grin was visible in the light from a corner street lamp as they crossed an intersection.

"The fellow said to take along people who don't have

transportation, didn't he? Besides, you know a good deal about this business. You'll be valuable to have along."

"I'm relieved that your motives aren't entirely unselfish," said Brand, laughing. "But how about other people? There's a lot of room in this car."

"I'm heading for the Blackthornes' home now," replied Ashley. "They don't have a car. Again, as you can see, I'm guided by a certain amount of enlightened self-interest."

"Camilla? That's an enlightened self-interest I'm glad you have right now. Since my apartment is right on the way, could we stop there for a minute?"

"We're not supposed to take any possessions with us," reminded Ashley.

"These aren't exactly possessions. I have some papers I brought with me from the Arctic. Since everything up there was destroyed, this may be the only copy, and it may be important when we start dealing with the higher sea level."

They stopped by Brand's apartment, and he collected his papers quickly. Then, without difficulty, they drove the short distance to the Blackthorne home. A good many people were getting ready to leave town, but the residential streets were not yet crowded. Most houses were dark, indicating that their residents were asleep and had not yet heard the dire news.

They would shortly. A police cruiser, with loudspeaker blaring, swung around a corner just as they pulled to the curb in front of the Blackthorne home. Brand got out of the car, but Ashley stayed behind the wheel.

"Coming?" asked Brand.

"You get them out here," replied Ashley drily. "I'll stay with the car. I expect a good many more people than usual will be tempted to become car thieves tonight."

Brand hadn't thought of that.

The lights in the Blackthorne home went on just as Brand stepped up on the front porch to ring the doorbell. Craig Blackthorne appeared at the door, in pajamas, drawn by the noise of the police cruiser. Through the door behind him, Brand caught sight of Camilla's startled face peering from the dining room.

Brand explained hurriedly. Craig admitted him at once and hurried out to get his family dressed. Brand paced the living room impatiently, sucking automatically on a dead pipe.

Suddenly, Jimmy Haggard burst in without knocking.

He was in the full camping uniform of a boy scout leader, with a pack on his back, mess kit, canteen, rope, hatchet and knife hanging from his belt.

"I'm glad you're here!" exclaimed Jimmy breathlessly, his nose twitching. "I got over as fast as I could, after telephoning all the other boys in the troop."

"I'm glad you showed up, too," said Brand. "If you don't have any transportation, I think we can make room for you. It's a big car."

"No, I'm taking the troop station wagon, with a couple of the boys' families. I was going to crowd Cam and her family in, but now . . . Just tell Chris to meet us at Noah's Knob, will you?"

With that, Jimmy hurried out the front door and was gone.

Brand was still puzzling over this when Chris appeared, first of the family to get dressed. He was in his scout uniform, too. Chris was a sharp youngster, his eyes as black as his sister's were blue; he had proved several years before that he could beat Brand at chess.

Brand conveyed Jimmy's message and asked, "What is Noah's Knob?"

"It's a high hill, where we've gone camping pretty often," answered Chris. "Old Man Noah owns the place. He doesn't like strangers much, but he's always let us camp there. It's only about thirty miles away."

Brand shook his head.

"I don't think that's far enough," he said. "We'll have to get well above sea level before the tidal wave hits."

"I think Noah's Knob ought to do it," said the boy. "It's pretty high. I think the top's about 250 feet above sea level."

This made a difference. But Brand said, "We'll see. It depends on how much ground we can cover in the next few hours. I'd rather get to Raleigh."

The rest of the family gathered, and they went out together. Three men were standing a few feet from the car, arguing with Ashley. One of them had a crowbar, another a broken beer bottle.

When they heard the door slam, they turned. At sight of the Blackthornes moving off the porch, they walked away hurriedly and disappeared into the shadows down the street.

Then Brand saw the pistol in Ashley's hand.

"Would-be car thieves," said Ashley laconically when Brand and the Blackthornes came up.

There was plenty of room for all of them in the car, and there would have been room for Jimmy. Chris, as the smallest, got into the front seat between Ashley and Brand.

The residential streets were more crowded now, with cars moving both ways and others backing out of driveways. They had to stop frequently, and it took them half an hour—compared to a normal time of ten minutes—to thread their way through the residential section to the nearest expressway entrance.

Ashley kept the pistol on the seat beside him. Once, when they were stopped at an intersection, he used it to threaten a pair of men who tried to force their way into the car.

They fell into a long double line of traffic, moving very slowly, that was threading its way up the curving expressway ramp. For about five minutes they held their place in line, inching forward now and then. Then Ashley pulled the car out of line and began the tedious job of turning it around on the narrow shoulder.

"What's the matter?" asked Brand.

"Look up there," replied Ashley with a gesture.

Around the curve of the ramp, almost right over their heads, where it entered the expressway, there was a milling crowd of people afoot. They were almost ominously silent. Only a low murmur came from them, and the brow of the bank had prevented Brand from noticing them before.

"I should have known they'd gather at the expressway entrances," said Ashley phlegmatically.

With a shock of dismay and anger, Brand recognized what the silent mob was doing. As each car reached the head of the snail's-pace procession, debouching into the expressway, a noiseless rush would converge on it. The people afoot would struggle with the occupants and among themselves for a place in the car, some crowding in as others were pulled out bodily. This battle royal would go on until the driver or someone who had displaced him could get the overloaded car into the stream of expressway traffic and pick up enough speed to leave the unsuccessful contenders behind.

How many injured, and perhaps dead—most of them the weaker ones, women and children—lay on the expressway shoulder above their line of vision, there was no way of

knowing. The occupants of cars already on the ramp could see what lay ahead of them when they got close enough, but it was then too late to avoid the struggle, with the traffic blocking the road behind.

Ashley managed to get the big limousine out of the ramp traffic and onto the comparatively clear street paralleling the expressway.

"But, Ashley, we'll have to get on the expressway to get out of town!" exclaimed Craig from the back seat. "We can never get out through the streets, with traffic getting heavier all the time. Can't you use your pistol?"

"Against that mob? I could kill a few, then they'd take it away from me and break my skull with it. I have a better idea."

They were approaching the next expressway entrance, and again a long double line of cars was jammed onto the ramp and far back along the other side of the street ahead of them. But Ashley took a sudden left turn, under the expressway viaducts, and turned onto the ramp leading to the *incoming* expressway lanes.

This ramp was clear. No one was trying to get back into the doomed city.

But when the limousine reached the top of the ramp, once more Ashley made a sharp left turn, and pulled the big car into the lanes the wrong way, heading out away from the city.

For as far as they could see on these broad lanes, there were no car lights. The lanes were clear, shooting straight out across the city toward the countryside they sought. Ashley stepped down on the accelerator, and the black limousine leaped forward smoothly and picked up speed.

At highway speed, they hummed past the bumper-to-bumper traffic which had conventionally taken the outgoing lanes, a dozen feet away. However much any of those creeping drivers might want to copy their unorthodox tactics, if any recognized what they were doing, it was too late for them now: first the gap between the viaducts and then a double-fenced center strip separated the incoming and outgoing expressway lanes.

"But, Ashley," objected Harriet mildly, when it became apparent to everyone in the car what he was doing, "aren't we breaking the law, driving the wrong way on the expressway?"

"I doubt that we'll get arrested, Mrs. Blackthorne," said

Ashley coolly. "If we do, a small fine or a bribed policeman is a small price to pay for the time we're gaining. Do you understand now?"

"I do," said Craig, disapprovingly. "We're doing the same thing, in different terms, that those people are doing back there when they take over other people's cars. We *are* breaking the law, to take unfair advantage of our fellow citizens in a crisis."

"I disagree with you, sir," said Ashley sharply, in a hard voice. "We're being intelligent, in using a perfectly good escape road that is not in use. They're being stupid in not using it, and the authorities are being stupid for not throwing it open to outgoing traffic. As for our breaking the law, there may be no difference in principle from the people who are hijacking cars at the entrances, but, again, we're being more intelligent in the way we break it."

With that, silence descended on the interior of the big black car as it raced outward, miles per hour above the speed limit, on the wrong side of the expressway.

5 • • •

THE WIND had been blowing in gusts, some of them strong enough to swerve the heavy car, since Brand and Ashley left the country club. Now it increased in power and settled down to a steady gale from the northwest. The showers, which had been frequent enough to keep the windshield wipers working, changed to sleet and then to a rattling hail which threatened to crack the windshield.

Ashley was forced to slow the car. Visibility closed in until the outgoing lanes nearby—still packed with cars—could be seen only as a dim glow from their headlights. The fog lights of the limousine showed them the road on their side only a short distance ahead, and there was always the danger of an occasional car coming in the proper direction.

This danger manifested itself now, for the first time since they had left New Argos. The headlights appeared in

front of them through the mixed rain, sleet and hail, coming slowly. Although the limousine was in the passing lane, Ashley pulled to the center shoulder and stopped to let the other car by.

"We were making pretty good time up to now," said Ashley resignedly, as he pulled back onto the pavement. Then, in a more satisfied tone: "We'll still make better time than those sheep over in the other lanes."

"How long have we been driving?" asked Brand.

"About twenty minutes," said Ashley. "I checked the time when we got on the expressway."

"We shouldn't be far from Noah's Knob then. Are we, Chris?"

"It's eight or ten more miles down the expressway, then off the expressway a bit," answered the boy.

With one hand, Ashley extracted a monogrammed cigarette case from his coat pocket, put a cigarette between his lips and punched the dashboard lighter. He held out the case to Brand, but Brand grunted a negative and lit his pipe.

"That should take us another thirty to forty minutes on the expressway at this rate," said Ashley. "But if it clears up, I'm in favor of trying to make it on inland to Raleigh."

"Jimmy's expecting to meet us at Noah's Knob," objected Chris.

"Jimmy can take care of himself," retorted Ashley. "I'm trying to get this outfit to safety."

The hail by now had laid down a thin, sparkling cover that made the road hard to see. Momentarily, it turned to huge wet flakes of snow that clung to the windshield and threatened to stop their progress altogether. Then, suddenly, it stopped, wind as well as snow.

With the cessation of the snow, the clouds passed over, too, and the stars shone out, frosty and bright, in a clear sky. Under the car's headlights, the raised expressway stood out ahead of them, glittering in piled ice. Across the dividing strip, no longer fenced now, was the double line of traffic in the outgoing lane, spaced farther apart now and moving somewhat faster.

Ashley stepped down on the accelerator. The wheels spun, then grabbed, and the car leaped forward, veering a bit.

"Now we'll make time!" he said. "Raleigh before daylight!"

"Ash, I'm cold," said Camilla from the back seat.

"The heater's on as high as it will go," said Ashley. "The temperature must have dropped way down out there."

He closed the car window, which he had partly opened to keep the windshield from frosting inside.

Ahead of them in the distance, oncoming lights appeared over a hill, a mass of lights, flashing from the ice-covered roadbed. Ashley slowed, pulled to the shoulder and stopped.

These cars were coming fast, and there were many of them. As they drew closer, red lights in the van began to flash and the wail of sirens arose.

They swept by, a big convoy of trucks and buses, with half a dozen state police cars leading it. They swept by at dangerous speed, the ice and snow flurrying up from their wheels in great clouds. The trucks and buses were empty, except for drivers grimly wrestling their wheels.

"I wonder where they're going in such a hurry?" asked Camilla.

"It's a rescue convoy going into town, I expect," said her father. "There are a lot of people there who have no way to get out, except afoot. If those people at the ramp had only waited, instead of attacking people in their cars—"

"We may be meeting more of these convoys," suggested Brand to Ashley. "I'd hate to plow into one head on, over a hill."

"We'll have plenty of time to get off the road," said Ashley, putting the car into gear and steering it back onto the pavement.

But Ashley's unorthodox ingenuity was to pay no more dividends. As they neared the top of the next rise, lights swept over the crest with breath-taking suddenness, and Ashley had to twist the car hurriedly and half-drive, half-skid, onto the shoulder to avoid a head-on collision.

These were four state police cars, traveling two abreast at high speed. As they rushed past the stopped limousine, one of the two rear ones slowed, stopped, turned around and came back, his red light beginning to flash. Ashley rolled down his window and sat with an expression of exasperated patience on his face, the car out of gear but the lights still on, as the police car pulled up beside them.

There were two officers in the car. The one on the right side turned a flashlight on the limousine, and illuminated everyone in it, in turn, slowly, without speaking. Then he said: "Buddy, you crazy or something?"

"I don't think so," said Ashley mildly. His bespectacled eyes were turned frankly on the policeman, and his face, with the dark forelock hanging over his forehead, bore an expression of perfect youthful innocence. Brand had the impression that this was an experience not completely foreign to Ashley.

"I think you must be," said the officer severely. "You could kill all these people, and other people too, driving the wrong way on the interstate like this."

To Brand's surprise, Ashley knew when to be partly honest.

"We were scared and were trying to get out of town before the flood hits," he said. "There were mobs hijacking cars going onto the outgoing lanes, and this was the only way we knew to get out."

"Well, you can't keep going on this side," said the officer in a more sympathetic tone. "There are other convoys coming into town as fast as they can get them here, and you'll get killed. Follow us."

The police car swung around. Ashley, with a rueful shrug, turned the limousine behind it. The officers led them to the nearest exit, waved them onto it, then stopped their car and watched—apparently to make sure that Ashley actually left the superhighway.

"Idiots!" growled Ashley. "I was afraid they'd try to take us all the way back to town."

"Well, it was good driving while it lasted," said Camilla.

"We're not through with them yet," promised Ashley.

They were on a deserted country road, which ran under the superhighway at right angles. It was asphalt-paved, but was slick with a thin ice coating from the hail and snow.

Ashley turned the limousine under the expressway viaduct, stopped it and turned off the lights.

"What's the matter, Ashley?" asked Craig from the back seat.

"Nothing," replied Ashley smugly. The dash board lighter clicked, and the glow lit up his self-satisfied face as he lighted a cigarette. "It's just that no cop is going to keep me off a perfectly good, clear road away from the coast."

Lights from the expressway swung down on the country road behind them, and turned under the viaduct. The police car pulled up beside them again.

"I thought you might try to pull a stunt like this," said

the officer who had spoken to them before. "Buddy, if you want on the expressway, go on over there and get on the right side of it."

"We can't make any time over there!" exclaimed Ashley, in genuine dismay now. "There's so much traffic I doubt we can even get on it."

"That's too bad. Other people don't want to get drowned either, you know."

"Look, Garland," said Brand to Ashley, "wouldn't we be better off staying to these back roads? From what Chris says, we can't be far from Noah's Knob now."

"That's okay, if you want to do that," said the officer. "But I'm telling you for your own good, stay off the eastbound lane. The army's coming in pretty close behind us, and they'll really throw you off of there."

"The army?" repeated Ashley.

"Yeah. These eastbound lanes are going to be reserved for official traffic, to try to get all these people out by bus and truck. And it won't do you any good to try to get back on farther down the line, because they're going to post sentries at all the exits."

"The whole damn government's conspiring to drown us!" cried Ashley in despair. "All right, Caravel, we'll try your idea. We'll take the back roads."

The police car pulled up and waited beside the road. Ashley backed the limousine and turned it around, and accelerated angrily along the straight country road. Looking back, Brand saw the police car turn around and slowly go back up to the superhighway.

It started raining again suddenly—no snow or hail this time, just rain in great sweeping sheets. The wind came up, gustily and fitfully, first from one direction, then from another.

Brand turned to the quiet family trio in the back seat, laying his arm along the back of the front seat behind Chris' head. His pipe was out again, and he pulled out his lighter and relit it.

This weather's from the atmospheric disturbance caused by the explosion," he explained. "There's no telling what we'll get in the next few days, or when. It could be a hurricane, it could be more snow. But there was a lot of water vapor released in the atmosphere, and I expect it will be raining pretty heavily all over the world for the next few weeks."

"That's one thing we didn't bring," said Harriet, "raincoats."

"I brought mine," said Chris. "It's in my pack, in the trunk."

"A little foolish to run away so suddenly, without bringing any extra clothes or anything, anyway," said Craig.

"No, sir, not at all," replied Ashley firmly. "We gained at least twenty miles, maybe twenty-five, by getting out as fast as we did and taking the eastbound lanes. You saw that traffic on the other side, and if we'd taken any more time, the police would have blocked us that much sooner."

"This is very hard for me to straighten out in my own conscience, Ashley," said Harriet. "I know that the way you handled this gained us time and may mean our lives. But it's hard for me to condone deliberately breaking the law the way you did, and leaving law-abiding people to struggle along behind us, in great danger of their lives."

"I think Ash is right," said Camilla suddenly and firmly. "We got a lot farther away from the coast, without injuring anyone else. They just weren't smart enough to do what we did. And we might have been killed by that mob if we'd tried to get in the right lanes anywhere in town."

"Very few people know what to do in a real crisis," said Ashley, full of self-confidence. "It takes strength and intelligence to survive in an emergency like this. A lot of those people back there are going to die because they don't have strength and intelligence."

"Or a limousine," added Brand drily.

Ashley laughed, without offense.

"I got the limousine by being strong and intelligent in business beforehand," he reminded.

The road was more crooked now, and there was a good deal of traffic coming from the other direction, heading toward the superhighway. Occasionally they came up behind another car going in their direction and had difficulty passing because of the rain and oncoming traffic.

"Don't we ever find a side road westward?" demanded Ashley at last, in irritation.

"The first one's about a mile farther on," said Chris. "I know where we are. We take it, and then turn off three or four more times before we get to Noah's Knob."

Ashley suddenly jammed on the brakes, throwing everyone in the car forward. At the limit of their headlight beams,

a column of people straggled across the road through the rain.

They came up to the pedestrians more slowly. The walkers were boys, in raincoats and the typical boy scout caps. They stood aside, on both sides of the road, waiting for the car to pass.

"Hey, hold up!" exclaimed Chris as they drew abreast. "There's Jimmy! It's the troop!"

Ashley stopped the car. Jimmy Haggard and the boy scouts crowded up to the sides.

"How did you get so far out so fast?" demanded Ashley.

"We never did try to get on the expressway, because we knew it would be so crowded," said Jimmy. "Some of the boys' families formed a caravan with me, and we just came straight west through the suburbs. We didn't have too much trouble getting through after we got out of the heavier residential districts."

"Hell!" exclaimed Ashley. "It hasn't been much more than an hour since we left you there, and you've made as good time as we have driving on a clear expressway."

"We took back streets and alleys," said Jimmy, almost apologetically. His nose twitched. "We came as straight as we could."

"But why are you afoot, Jimmy?" asked Harriet. "Has something happened to the cars and the boys' families?"

"No, ma'am. They're coming on, but they're back a way. They have to stay on the roads. The boys and I are taking a cross-country hiking trail that's a lot shorter, and I'm pretty sure we're making better time."

"Mama, let me go with Jimmy and the boys!" cried Chris, squirming in the front seat. "I've got my raincoat. Can I, please?"

"You certainly may not, young man," said Craig. "You're staying in the car with your family."

"We need you, Chris, to show us how to get there," said Brand.

"That's right, Chris," said Jimmy. "A couple of the boys stayed with the caravan to show them how to get to Noah's Knob this way. We'll see you there, okay?"

With a desultory wave, he turned. He and the boy scouts crossed the gully beside the road and plunged into the muddy field beyond, slogging along with some difficulty.

Ashley pulled back into the road.

"Doggone it!" muttered Chris. "I bet they beat us there!"

6 • • •

"What time is it?" asked Craig from the back seat.

Brand glanced at the dashboard clock.

"It's five-thirty," he said. "I had no idea it was that late. It'll be daylight before long."

"A couple of hours yet, this time of year," said Ashley. "Don't forget, Caravel, it was about two o'clock when we left the country club, and we spent a lot of time worrying around in traffic in town before we got started on the expressway."

"We couldn't possibly make it to Raleigh today, with all the traffic on the road, Ashley," said Craig.

"I'm afraid not," admitted Ashley. "It's Noah's Knob or nothing."

"I think Noah's Knob is best," said Brand with decision. "If Chris knows what he's talking about, it's high ground, and I think we'd better make high ground by noon anyhow."

"That soon?" asked Craig.

"As I said earlier, I really don't know," replied Brand.

He reached forward and switched on the car radio. It hummed for a moment, warming up, then a crisp voice issued from the speaker:

". . . loss of life to this point cannot be estimated, and property damage, of course, is in the billions. In addition to the scientific and military personnel wiped out by the explosions in both polar regions, shock waves created a vast peripheral area of destruction. Heavy fallout is expected to cause many delayed casualties in northern Canada, Alaska, northern Siberia and Scandinavia.

"Heaviest casualties, except from the initial explosion, have been along northern coastal areas, although the world's southernmost coastal areas are beginning to feel some effects. Tidal waves 150 to 200 feet high, on the average, are sweeping equatorward from blast areas, and their height and speed is increased in narrower channel

areas. Because of the funnel of the North Sea, the entire northwestern part of Europe and all of the British Isles except the highlands may be inundated.

"Along the American Atlantic coast, the speed of the wave is estimated at one hundred miles an hour or better. In the seven and a half hours since the explosion, it has devastated a great stretch of the Canadian coast and is approaching Newfoundland. At the present rate, the front of the great wave is expected to reach the New York area some time between two and four o'clock this afternoon.

"Every effort is being made by the United States and Canadian governments to evacuate the population in the threatened areas. Everything that has wheels or wings has been pressed into service. Many people are trying to reach the uplands afoot."

Brand turned the volume down.

"We couldn't possibly reach Raleigh," he said. "Two o'clock in New York means it will hit New Argos by five. Even figuring the maximum—seven o'clock—look at the time it's taken us to get less than thirty miles, and that expressway traffic is moving awfully slow. Raleigh's a trip you could make in less than two hours, normally, but I don't think it can be made in twelve with several million people swarming inland."

"Well, we'd already decided it was Noah's Knob or nothing, hadn't we?" demanded Ashley, somewhat irritably. "That's what I've been basing my driving on since we left the expressway."

"I think Noah's Knob ought to take care of a two-hundred-foot crest, if Chris is right about its height," said Brand.

"I know I'm right," said Chris. "We measured heights by triangulation, for surveying merit badge."

"I suggested Raleigh or Durham because I was thinking of the Fall Line," said Brand. "That would get us off the coastal plain. My gosh, do you realize what a 250-foot crest will do to Florida?"

The rain now was torrential. It had long since washed the road free of all ice. It came down as though someone had emptied a huge bucket from the sky. At top speed, the wipers could not keep the windshield clear, and Ashley was straining his eyes forward at ten miles an hour.

"Those poor boys out there hiking must be soaked," said Harriet sympathetically.

"Those poor soaked boys are probably making better time than we are," said Ashley. "I'd be willing to get wet, to get ahead faster."

"Ash, I'm hot," said Chris.

"So am I," chimed in Camilla. "I'm burning up. Turn down the heater, Ash."

"It's been off for ten minutes," said Ashley. "It's just our being cooped up together in this tight car in the rain."

"It's probably warm outside now," said Brand equably. "The atmospheric disturbance would bring tropical air up here as easily as arctic air from Canada, and they might alternate pretty suddenly. I expect we're having an unseasonable summer for an hour or two right now."

"Well, it seems silly to turn on the air-conditioning this close to Christmas, but I'll do it," said Ashley, and switched it on.

Moving slowly, making turns at Chris' directions, they crept through a village. It appeared deserted, houses and stores dark, although some of its inhabitants could have been there, still asleep.

They were no more than a quarter of a mile beyond the hamlet when the limousine's engine sputtered and stopped. The air-conditioning died, and the lights dimmed.

"What the devil?" muttered Ashley. He ground the starter, without result.

"We haven't been watching the fuel gauge," said Brand, pointing. "I'm afraid we're out of gas, Garland."

"Confound it, I told the chauffeur to fill that tank. I ought to fire him!"

"Do that, if you can find him again," suggested Brand derisively. "He probably did fill it. The kind of driving we've done tonight takes a lot of gas."

"Well," said Craig, "unless we're going to hike in the rain like Jimmy and the scouts, we'd better find some gasoline. Do you suppose there's any in that little town we just passed through?"

"We'll have to try it," said Brand. "Do you want to go, Garland, or shall I?"

"We'd better both go," said Ashley. "The place looked deserted, but we could run into somebody. Mark my words, Caravel, nobody can be trusted at a time like this not to knock you in the head—nobody."

"That's true. For that very reason, do you think both of us ought to go and leave the Blackthornes here?"

"Mr. Blackthorne can keep my pistol. I think two of us can take care of ourselves without it."

He handed the pistol back to Craig, and the two men got out in the pouring rain. In an instant, they were soaked to the skin. Ducking their heads, they slogged back down the road.

"Well, Caravel, it looks like I've scored a point on you," said Ashley as they walked.

"What do you mean?"

"You heard Cam back there, didn't you? She said she thought I was right in what I did. She's a woman, and a woman wants her man smarter and stronger that other men, especially in a crisis."

"I hadn't thought of it, and I wasn't aware of any competition with you," said Brand firmly. "I haven't been analyzing my feelings toward Cam tonight, except that I know I want to get her and the rest of us to safety."

"All right, if that's the way you want to look at it, Caravel," said Ashley, laughing and shaking the water from his eyes. "But I think you're a competitor, and that's the way *I'm* going to look at it."

They reached the village. It seemed even smaller now than it had when they drove through it. There was a scattering of darkened houses, not very close together, and two stores, facing each other across the wide street. In front of one of the stores stood a battered gasoline pump.

"We're in business," said Ashley. "But what can we carry it back in?"

"I don't know. Borrow a can from one of these houses, I suppose. The owner of the store probably lives in one of them."

"Borrow? This place is deserted, Caravel. We'll do what's necessary."

Ashley walked by the pump, up to the entrance of the store. A sign over the old wooden door said: "Thompson's Store, General Merchandise." Ashley took the knob and rattled it. The door was locked.

He walked to the single show window and peered in. Then he stooped, picked up a piece of heavy plank lying in front of the store and smashed in the plate glass with a single blow. The shards fell around him in a shower.

Ashley stepped in through the shattered window. Dubiously, Brand followed him.

Store lights suddenly went on, and an elderly man ap-

peared from behind a tall counter, dressed in a nightshirt. He held a shotgun, pointed steadily at them.

"What do you fellows think you're doing?" he demanded in a cold voice, sleepy eyes fixed on them.

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir," said Ashley. "We thought the place was deserted. We knocked on the door several times, and tried several of the houses. We're stalled up the road in the storm, and need some gasoline."

"That ain't no way to get it, breaking into a place—not for honest men."

"As I said, sir, I thought the place was deserted. We'll gladly pay for everything, including the window."

"Well, now, that's different," said the man, lowering the gun slightly. "If you've got the cash, that is."

The bargain was struck in short order. The storekeeper filled a five-gallon can with gasoline for them, and Ashley, from his ample wallet, paid for it plus about twice what the plate glass window was worth. Under the storekeeper's narrow-eyed goading, he added an extra ten dollars to pay for the trouble the man claimed he would have sitting up the rest of the night to keep thieves from coming in through the broken window.

"But aren't you going to try to get away?" burst out Brand at last, as they were ready to leave. "Haven't you heard about the tidal wave coming in?"

The man cackled.

"Sure, I heard it. Nothing else on the radio all night. I don't believe it. The ocean ain't going to get this far up in the country. I've lived through hurricanes before."

"But it's true! You ought to get out of here!"

"And leave my store for somebody to rob? You've got your gas, boys, and you'd better go now. I'll take care of myself."

He lifted the shotgun suggestively.

They left. Brand carrying the can of gasoline, they walked out from under the store's awning into the wide street. Brand felt queasy between his shoulders, as though the old man might shoot them down and take his gasoline back.

The rain had stopped as suddenly as it began. In the graying predawn, wisps of vapor rose from the pavement ahead of them and around them. They walked through a mist, as at the dawn of time. The air was humid and still, almost tropical in its warmth.

"Wouldn't you know it?" grumbled Brand. "If we'd waited half an hour to come back, we wouldn't have gotten wet."

Ashley had other matters on his mind.

"Stupid old fool," he said, pushing back the damp forelock from his forehead. "A lot of good that money will do him in a few hours."

They reached the car and poured the gasoline into the tank. Switching off the air conditioner, Ashley rolled down the windows.

"That air conditioner takes fuel," he said. "Five gallons isn't much, and I'm damned if I'll drive back there and face that old man again to fill the tank."

They started off once more. At the next turn-off, Chris directed them onto a road that once had been graveled, but was now a sea of mud. Ashley balked.

"We'll never make it through there," he said. "Isn't there some other way, Chris—a road that's paved? If there isn't, we're either going to have to go back to the expressway or walk."

"Well, we can go the long way," said Chris reluctantly. "Through Holt's Corners. It's all hard-top, but it's about ten miles longer. If we go that way, Jimmy and the other fellows will beat us to Noah's Knob."

"Let them! Damn, Chris, we're not racing, we just want to get there!"

They went through Holt's Corners. People were stirring in the little town, not trying to get out of it, apparently unconcerned with the warnings that they too were hearing over the radio. Ashley shook his head in disbelief at the obtuseness of some people, and had the limousine's tank filled at the town's only service station.

Other refugees apparently had passed through the village already. The tobacco-chewing owner of the service station charged Ashley triple rates for his gasoline.

It was eight-thirty in the morning before Noah's Knob appeared around a wooded corner, a sudden rounded hill thrusting upward in the midst of flat country. It was well wooded, and a wisp of smoke twisted up into the misty morning sky through the trees near its summit.

They turned off on the winding, rocky road that led up the Knob, and twisted upward. Near its top, they came out into a cleared area commanded by a small log house with a

weird-looking, curved wooden structure looming up behind it.

As they drove into the clearing, Jimmy Haggard and three of the boy scouts came around the corner of the house and advanced to greet them.

7 • • •

BRAND HAD NOT KNOWN what to expect of "Old Man Noah" from the little that Chris had said about him. He did not appear to be "nutty," as Brand had half-anticipated.

On the contrary, he was very dignified, almost patriarchal, with a full beard and mild blue eyes. His name was Noah Adams, he told them as he escorted the tired group into his log house, and he had spent most of his life here as a hermit, because of an unshakable conviction.

"I've been expecting this," he said, when they were settled with steaming coffee in comfortable homemade chairs around a big fireplace. The fire was almost out, and the windows were open to the unseasonable warmth. "I've been expecting it for years. I told the boys here about it often enough."

"You mean you were expecting the nuclear explosions at the poles, Mr. Adams?" asked Brand, with interest.

"Not, not them. I don't know much about your science, young fellow. I was born and bred a farmer, and I've always lived close to the good earth and sky. I've been expecting it because of the Good Book."

"The Good Book? You mean the Bible?"

"That's right, son. I've studied it all my life, and these fellows are wrong when they say the rainbow means no more floods. I figure we've just been on probation all this time, and the world's violated its probation by being as wicked as it is. So, you see, I've expected this flood to come."

"Then that's why the boys call you Old Man Noah," said Brand. "It's quite a coincidence that you should be named Noah, isn't it?"

"Well, my father studied the Good Book, too," said the old man. "Maybe the Lord meant my name to be what it is. Anyway, I've tried to be loyal like my namesake and save two of each kind to start life anew."

"Save them? You mean, like Noah did in the ark?"

"That's right, in the ark. That's my ark, behind the house. Would you folks like to look at it?"

The other members of the group, tired out from the nerve-racking trip, declined. But Brand went with the old man.

The ark towered twice the height of the log house, and was built along classical lines. Brand felt that millennia unraveled beneath his feet as he strolled up the sloping gangplank onto the deck. The deck was roofed all around with sloping tarpaulins, against the rain, and it was dim beneath them.

From the interior of the ark, through barred windows around its superstructure, came unmistakable animal sounds, in considerable variety.

"I have taken a pair of all of those useful to man, that I could get," said Noah. "I could not get beasts like camels and yaks, but I have done the best I could in the circumstances the Lord imposed upon me. I have gathered together the birds, and the insects upon which the birds must feed."

He led Brand around the deck toward the companionway which descended into the ark. But as they rounded the bow, which projected beyond the corner of Noah's log house, Brand caught sight of a tableau, from the corner of his eye, which caused him to pause.

Ashley and Camilla had left the house and were standing together beside Ashley's limousine. No one else was near. Ashley had a grip on Camilla's wrist, and, although she was not straining to pull away, they appeared to be arguing.

"I'll take you down and show you the cages," said Noah. "Since I am a bachelor, I'll have to find a family who will be willing—"

"Excuse me," interrupted Brand abruptly. "I think I'd better check on something."

With a rising anger that surprised him, he hurried back around the deck to the gangplank and descended it to the ground. He went around the back of the log house toward the car.

When he came around the corner of the house, he was

within easy hearing of the pair, but was screened from their sight by some shrubbery. At the first words he heard, he stopped.

"I don't know what's responsible for this change that's come over you, Ash," Camilla was saying, "but I don't like it. Not at all."

If this was only a personal quarrel and not something more serious, Brand felt that it was not his place to interfere. He peered through the shrubbery. Camilla was standing with her back to the limousine, and Ashley stood before her as though to block her leaving, but now not touching her.

"The world has changed, Cam, since yesterday," said Ashley. "Most people don't realize it, but that explosion and this coastal flood, even if it lasts only a few days, will have an impact on our society as severe as a major war. Those who realize this and take advantage of it are the ones who will come out ahead when society readjusts itself after the crisis.

"Yesterday I was a successful young business man in a stable society. The personality traits required for that weren't the same as those necessary now. Now the man who has a chance to build himself an empire is the strong, clever man."

Camilla looked up at him with an incredulous expression on her face.

"I think you've been watching too many Western movies on television," she said firmly. "Even if you were right, I don't see how it's being either strong or clever to run off and leave a safe place like this."

"That's what I've been trying to explain to you, Cam. Since it's stopped raining, we could make it inland without any trouble before two o'clock. My company still owns a lot of land there that we were holding to sell to people moving away from the coast. There's going to be a run of buyers as these refugees pour inland, and the quicker I get there to take advantage of it, the better off we're going to be."

"Well, you can go in and start building your empire, if you want to—if you don't drown on the way," said Camilla. "But Daddy said we're going to follow Brand's advice and stay here, and you're crazy if you think I'm going to leave my family and go off with you."

Ashley seized her by the shoulders.

"I'm trying to make you see, Cam!" he exclaimed. "Now's the time to make the decision!"

"I've made it," she retorted. "Since you're playing the strong man, Ash, maybe I ought to threaten to scream for Daddy. But if you don't let go of me, I'm just going to slug you."

Ashley released her suddenly, and she stalked off angrily toward the house. Brand, who had been ready to go into action, relaxed and retired the way he had come.

Brand did not return to the ark, but walked between it and the house, and beyond them, out onto the slope of the hill where Jimmy Haggard and the boy scouts were busily pitching pup tents. The log house had only three rooms, one of them a kitchen. It had been decided that the scouts would sleep in their little tents, while the adults—both those present and those yet to come—would sleep in the house and the cars.

Chris had happily joined Jimmy and his group of scouts, about a dozen of them. Some of them were staking down tents and digging drainage ditches around them, while others cleaned mess kits, built a fire and prepared some meat and vegetables obtained from Old Man Noah. They were cutting up the meat, potatoes, carrots, onions and celery, and dropping them into a big lard can half full of water.

Brand wended his way through this youthful community and thoughtfully descended the hill. Considerably disturbed, he cogitated the feelings he had just experienced watching the argument between Ashley and Camilla.

Just when he had realized that Ashley was trying to persuade Camilla to leave Noah's Knob with him and try to reach the highlands farther inland, Brand was not sure, but it had been early enough in the conversation for him to have an agonizing few minutes before he was sure she would not consent ultimately. And what would have been his own reaction if she had consented?

He did not know. She did, after all, have the right to make such a decision for herself. But he had fought the impulse to step out of his concealment, level Ashley with a blow of his fist and conduct Camilla forcibly back into the log house.

Brand was not so unacquainted with his own soul as to fail to recognize that he was in love with Camilla. To admit it to himself shocked him a little. When Ashley had issued

his fortuitous challenge at the night club—was it only a few hours ago?—Brand had been more amused then anything else, for he was still thinking of Camilla as the happy-go-lucky dancing companion of two years earlier. But Camilla had changed while he was in the Arctic, and so had he, and now he looked upon her with new eyes.

Yes, he was in love with Camilla, Brand decided. So? There was very little he could do about it in a positive way right now. The first task before them all was to survive the tidal wave and find some place to settle beyond the coastal area, which would be flooded by the ocean's rise.

Where? The tidal wave would devastate the entire coastal plain, and there would be a good deal of suffering during the period of adjustment for the influx of refugees attempting to find some place among the population already settled inland. One might as well go on and settle in the new polar lands which would be opened up by the melting of the ice.

And why not? These areas would be opened up just as efficiently by the explosion as though Project People had continued to term. The balance of ice and tropics was overthrown now, and it would be at least a century before it would be restored by the redeposit of the ice to the point that the polar areas became uninhabitable again.

Brand strolled through the sparse bushes that clung to the rocky slope of Noah's Knob, and contemplated the prospect of pioneering in the polar areas, with Camilla as his wife. The climate might still be pretty severe on the Antarctic Continent, but a pleasant northern temperate climate should prevail in upper Canada and Greenland.

Greenland rather appealed to Brand. He had not been very far from Greenland at his post in Project People. But the melting of the ice would not make all of Greenland habitable: only a comparatively small stretch of the island's coast was lower than six thousand feet above sea level. As for Antarctica, it was even higher.

The melting of the heavy ice cover on these lands would cause them to rise, so that they would not be too much lower than—

Suddenly, Brand stopped walking. He stood, as if stunned.

The isostatic rise of land when the icecaps melted! They had figured on this, and on the eustatic correction in the rise of sea level, due to the sinking of the ocean bed under the weight of added water, but . . .

Many times in prehistory, there had been subsidence of

present land areas far more than a hundred feet, creating great inland seas. There were the whale bones in Michigan and Vermont, more than five hundred feet above sea level. And *that* was it—*that* was the factor he had been searching for, that the calculators had insisted was missing!

He scurried back up the slope at a half-run, hastening through the encampment of startled boy scouts, making his way around the log house to the limousine. He found his briefcase with its papers and rummaged through it until he found what he was seeking, the equation.

He couldn't find a pencil. He spread the sheet out on the still wet ground beside the big car, and began scratching figures in the damp dirt with a stick.

He was hardly aware that Ashley and Camilla, Jimmy and Chris, attracted by his excited trek to the car, gathered about him, one by one, to watch him silently as he figured, muttering to himself.

At last he looked up, and they were standing around him, quietly, wondering. He looked up at them blindly, hardly seeing them.

"My God, it's worse than anybody ever expected!" he exclaimed in a low voice.

"What is? What is it, Brand?" asked Camilla anxiously, coming up to him.

"The sea! Noah is right, and all the scientists were wrong. Everybody overlooked something."

"What are you talking about, Caravel?" demanded Ashley gruffly. "What's wrong?"

"We thought about the isostatic balance of the continents, of course, but we underestimated it, grossly," said Brand, half to himself. "If only we'd interpreted the equation, Project People would have been halted before the explosion ever occurred."

He squatted there, appalled, the stick still in his hand, the paper bearing the equation lifting slightly in the faint breeze. Camilla, beside him, stroked his hair as though he were a child.

"What is it, Brand?" she asked again. "Please tell us what's wrong."

He stood up suddenly and instinctively put his arm around Camilla's shoulders. She did not draw away.

"The sea level is not going to rise just a hundred feet," said Brand steadily, without expression. "It's going to rise more than a thousand feet. What we overlooked was that,

when the ice-covered lands like the Antarctic Continent rise after the weight of the ice is taken from them, other continental areas are going to sink to maintain the elastic balance under the earth's crust. We didn't actually overlook it, but we didn't think it would amount to that much."

"More than a thousand feet?" repeated Ashley. "What does that mean, to us?"

"It means that it isn't just going to be the coastal areas that will flood," said Brand. "The whole eastern and central portions of the North American Continent will be flooded, except the very top part of the Appalachian Range. We can't be sure of being safe under three thousand feet—and that leaves just the high plateaus of the Rockies as a haven for the entire population of the continent."

"You mean we'll get flooded here on Noah's Knob?" asked Jimmy. His nose twitched and he looked as though he were going to cry.

"No. No, we're safe enough here for now. This tidal wave is just from the sudden melting of the ice. But the continents are going to sink fast, because the ice was removed all at once. Instead of settling at a level of only a hundred feet higher, as we thought, the sea is going to rise steadily, and pretty fast, until it floods all the land up to one thousand feet, and I'm not sure how much above that."

With admirable calm, Ashley extracted a cigarette from his case and lighted it with a steady hand.

"Then, if I understand you, when we leave here after the tidal wave, we're not going to be able to stop at Raleigh, or even Greensboro or Winston-Salem," he said. "Is that right?"

"That's right," said Brand. "We're going to have to try to get inland as far as the high Appalachians, if we can't make it to the Rocky Mountain area. The terrible thing is that, for every person who dies in this tidal wave, I'm afraid hundreds will drown before the land stops sinking."

Ashley stood straight, the cigarette hanging from his lips, the image of Modern Man defying nature and fate. He removed his spectacles slowly, and his dark eyes were startlingly opaque, like onyx.

"To hell with them, Caravel," he said coldly. "I'm thinking of us. And we're going to survive, by God!"

8 • • •

SHORTLY AFTER NOON, the cars of the boy scouts' families struggled up Noah's Knob in a ragged line. The sons of some of these families were still in the cars with them, but it was a tribute to the trust the parents placed in Jimmy Haggard that so many of them had permitted the boys to trek with him through the rain, confident that he would save the youngsters whether they themselves reached safety or not.

By now, the unseasonably warm weather had been cut short, and the cavalcade came up the hill in a pouring rain and a howling gale. All the youngsters were sent onto the ark for shelter, and the adults crowded into Old Man Noah's house.

Brand, Ashley, Jimmy and the Blackthornes felt rather as though they were distinguished from the rest of the gathering by the status of "old settlers," by virtue of having arrived first. They gathered, with Old Man Noah, in a corner of the big living room at one end of the fireplace, clustering around a battered console radio. Some of the newcomers huddled around a television set at the other end of the room and the remainder sat around in groups, some playing cards, others just talking.

There was a big window in this corner, overlooking the long slope of Noah's Knob and the road that wound around its base. During occasional breaks in the heavy rain, they were able to see this road, and there was heavy traffic on it now. All of it was moving slowly away from the coast, and the road was filled sometimes with cars from shoulder to shoulder, making three one-way lanes out of the two-lane road. But no more cars turned up the rocky little road leading up Noah's Knob.

"I didn't know there were that many cars in the whole state," said Camilla in wonder. "Traffic wasn't anything like that, except on the expressway, when we drove out."

"New Argos is a big city, and there were thousands of automobiles there, my dear," said her father. "Those we saw on the expressway were just the advance guard, and we were lucky to get out ahead of the main body."

"But thousands of cars have moved in and out of New Argos every day, at the morning and afternoon rush hours, without taking this long to get where they were going, Daddy," protested Camilla.

"There are a lot more of them this time, Cam, and their drivers are scared," said Brand. "They aren't prepared for such a trip. Cars run out of gas, and break down, and others have wrecks, and these jam up traffic on the highways. There are probably dozens or scores of bottlenecks caused by such things on every road leading out of New Argos."

They had been listening to the radio in desultory fashion, keeping it low. For the most part, the hum of conversation and the sound of the television set across the room had overridden the voices on the radio. Now Ashley leaned forward and turned it up.

"We have had two or three reports of damage to dock and harbor facilities on the Jersey side of The Narrows," said the announcer, "and there was one unconfirmed report that a large ship had gone aground on Hoffman Island, in the Lower Bay. Trustworthy reports are hard to get, because the entire communications network is jammed and in a state of confusion, especially in the New York and New England areas.

"There has been a report, purportedly by police radio, that streets in lower Manhattan are awash, but we cannot be sure whether this, if true, is from a rise in the water level or from the torrential rains that have virtually paralyzed all activity in the Northeast.

"These rains, coupled with widespread panic, have put to naught all the efforts of Civil Defense and other governmental agencies to evacuate the population from the coastal danger zones. No accurate estimates can be made, of course, but one Civil Defense official tells us that no more than ten per cent of the people in the megalopolis stretching from Boston through New York and Atlantic City to Cape May can have reached safety.

"There have been absolutely no reports from the New England coast except those few which we relayed to you, stating that they could see the wave approaching in the

distance. We can only assume that hundreds of thousands of people are dying as the wave rolls southward.

"We hope to bring you more accurate reports from the New York area, for a reason which is tragic and regrettable. The effort to evacuate the area has proved so futile that some New Yorkers have determined to put their trust in the structural strength of the city's skyscrapers, such as the Empire State Building and Rockefeller Center. There is little else they can do. Despite turbulent atmospheric conditions, we have established radio contact with one group of these people periodically, and are attempting to re-establish it now.

"This metropolitan fatalism is repeated across the continent, although residents of the West Coast have been more successful in evacuation. Our latest report from San Francisco mentioned dancing at the Top of the Mark."

Ashley turned the volume down slightly.

"That's terrible!" exclaimed Harriet. "All those people, trapped in the cities and unable to get out!"

"Yes, we were lucky in New Argos," said her husband soberly. "In spite of the heavy traffic, a large percentage of the people should reach safety before the wave gets this far south."

"Thousands of people drowned!" muttered Jimmy. He swung around to face Ashley. "How do you feel about it now, superman?"

"What do you mean by that?" demand Ashley, bristling.

"*We're* going to survive, by God!" Jimmy repeated Ashley's earlier words. "How does this make you feel about that, when you know human beings are actually dying by the thousands?"

"I am not aware that a more humanitarian attitude on my part would have been of the slightest value to those people in New York and New England," retorted Ashley. His only symptom of disturbance was to extract another cigarette from his case and light it with a hand that trembled a little now. "Because some other people weren't able to escape doesn't invalidate our making every effort to save ourselves. Does it?"

"No, it doesn't. But I resent your superior attitude!" Jimmy burst out, so vehemently that some of the others in the room looked in their direction in surprise. "We can make every effort to save ourselves, and still have a little

human sympathy for other people. We can even help other people, maybe, while we're about it."

"Look, my young friend," said Ashley, although Jimmy was not at all his junior, "the same qualities that made me a business success in New Argos while you were fooling around with knot-tying and woodcraft are the qualities that are going to be needed to get us out of this emergency. Those qualities are strength and intelligence in competition with other people who are trying to get the same things we want.

"They're qualities that are going to be even more important now, since we know we're going to have to fight our way to the mountains, where there's room for only a fraction of the population. Survival of the fittest is the law of life when the protection of civilized society is broken down."

"So you think your type is the fittest when civilization breaks down!" sneered Jimmy, his nose twitching. "You have a lot to learn, Ash, and it's going to be hard for you. You laugh at my woodcraft, and you think, just because I never worshiped your golden idol of business and commerce, that I'm some sort of an idiot."

"Now, boys!" exclaimed Harriet, fluttering her hands helplessly. "Don't argue! I'm sure Ashley doesn't think you're an idiot, Jimmy."

Her attempt at intervention did no good.

"Let me tell you one thing, little business magnate Ashley Garland," said Jimmy with poisonous emphasis. "The strength and intelligence you brag about are just callousness, and you'll find that out when you have to deal with nature instead of human adversaries. It's nature we're going to have to fight to get to the mountains, with all the roads and civilized communities washed away by this tidal wave, and the youngest boy scout out there in a pup tent is going to prove fitter than you are for survival in those conditions!"

"Knock it off!" said Brand brusquely. "I think you're both all wet. I think the people most likely to survive are going to be those who keep their heads and don't start calling each other hard names."

With a shrug, Ashley swallowed a retort he had been about to make, and turned up the radio again.

". . . rain seems to have lifted temporarily," a crisp,

controlled voice was saying. "With the glasses, it's possible to make out the Statue of Liberty now."

"Say, they got New York!" exclaimed Craig, leaning forward intently. "That must be their radio contact in one of the skyscrapers!"

"It's incredible, but there's a plane out there," said the measured voice. "Where he came from, I don't know, but he seems to be heading in the direction of Teterboro. He'll never make it. It's a big plane, but the wind is tossing him around like a leaf.

"We'd hoped copters might come to take us out of here, but we know now they can't make it unless the building manages to stand through the wave. Too much wind and . . ."

The voice faded out in a burst of static, and for a few moments, straining their ears, the listeners could hear nothing but a murmur just below the limits of intelligibility. Then the voice came through stronger again.

". . . can see all the way down into the street. You know how you look down on the people and the cars and they look like little ants and bugs creeping around? Well, by George, it's that way now! There's water in the streets—it's like a canal, from wall to wall, up over the sidewalks—but they're down there, walking and driving around in it, like they've always done, twenty-four hours a day!"

He paused, and when he resumed, there was a change in his tone.

"I believe we're ready for the test now. The mist and rain in the distance make things so gray I can't be sure that I'm able to see all the way to The Narrows through these glasses. But there's something sparkling and moving out there across the bay, and I very much suspect that it's our wave."

He gasped, and suddenly the voice was no longer controlled at all, but convulsed with terror.

"My God, it is the wave! It's not just in the bay! It's a solid wall, all the way from Elizabeth across Brooklyn! I never thought it would be anything like this! The ocean's rolling over Brooklyn like a sandspit!"

There was a moment of silence. The refugees on Noah's Knob were gathered now in a compact mass around the radio. The television set, with routine news of the flood,

went ignored. They waited breathlessly for the next words from this invisible outpost at the edge of disaster.

"It's coming down the East River, too," he said. "It's coming at us from two directions. I had no idea it would be anything like this! Our only chance of holding up is that the other buildings will break its force before it hits us."

He paused and, astonishingly, laughed. It was a sharp laugh, full of irony.

"They're still down there in the street!" he exclaimed. "They must be swimming—the water must be well over a man's head by now. Swimming on Broadway!

"It's very interesting—it's strange that one can find things interesting, and think about them, at a time like this—but this isn't a wave with the gradual, conical shape you see at the beach. The water has risen some ahead of it—it's well up in the streets—but the wave is like a huge wall advancing.

"The Old Lady is gone. Let us pray that Liberty does not disappear with her statue. We're in for it in a moment—I can't see Governor's Island or Ellis Island any more.

"It's started raining again or the fog's closed down. No! That's spray! Spray and mist ahead of the wave! I can't see anything outside any more.

"I wonder if it's hit Perth Amboy. I have an aunt there.

"It must be among the buildings now. I can feel the floor shudder. Oops! There went the lights!

"We aren't going to make it! The building's swaying—"

Abruptly, there was silence.

The silence dragged. The people in the log house on Noah's Knob looked at each other, the dim light from the rainy sky seeping back into their eyes, coming slowly back to the reality of where they were.

Another voice spoke on the radio, a different voice which may have been the one they heard before the argument between Ashley and Jimmy. It sounded tinny and shallow.

"Our contact has been broken with New York," said the announcer. "We don't really know, of course, that the building collapsed. It may be that the radio merely went out."

"He knows," said Brand somberly. "And so do we."

9 • • •

THE TIDAL WAVE arrived at Noah's Knob at a time which would have been dusk had the sky been clear.

As it was, the day had been dim since early afternoon, from the heavy cloud cover, and most of the time it rained so that it was impossible to see the road at the foot of the hill. The wind blew with such hurricane force that all the boy scouts' tents were ripped from the ground; but, fortunately, all but one plastered themselves against the house or the ark, or caught in nearby trees.

Obviously, however, the boys would have to sleep either in the house or the ark.

Strangely, as had happened in New York, the rain stopped shortly before the tidal wave struck. The clouds did not disperse, but lifted, so that a weird sort of twilight illuminated the countryside.

Some of the refugees on Noah's Knob, including Brand, Ashley, Jimmy and Craig, left the log house when it stopped raining, and stood looking out toward the east, toward the distant coastline. The soil atop the hill was light and rocky, spotted with coarse grass and twisted shrubs, and there was little mud. The trees, already denuded of their leaves by the chill of autumn, had been ripped and broken by the gale, which now had died to a steady, salt-laden breeze.

All the men strained their eyes toward the gloomy east, where dark storm clouds clung to the horizon on the edge of night.

In the strange twilight, the rain-wet countryside stretched glistening below them toward the sea. For a great distance, each house and barn and leafless tree stood out sharply, as though sketched with a sharp black pencil. Under the clouds on the far horizon, it seemed that they could distinguish the dark line that was New Argos, a faint glow of light touching its silhouette. Surprisingly, there were

lights in some of the farmhouses between New Argos and Noah's Knob.

The network of roads stood out now like lighter gray ribbons laid over the darker ground. A desultory scattering of car lights crept along them like glowworms, all coming from the direction of the coast.

"Why do they bother?" groaned Brand. "Don't they know it's too late now?"

"Wouldn't you still be trying to get out if you didn't know certainly when the wave would strike?" retorted Craig.

"Amazing!" murmured Ashley in a low voice. "What sort of people would wait this late to get away from a doomed coast? Surely, they could have left earlier, even with the traffic as heavy as it was."

"I expect some people wouldn't believe it was that serious, and stayed to get together some of their possessions to bring along," suggested one of the other men.

At the foot of the hill, below them, there was no longer the jam there had been earlier, but some cars still hurried around the curves to head westward toward uplands which were now much too far away.

"Why don't the fools stop here?" demanded Jimmy excitedly. "Can't they see this is the only high ground they can reach?"

He started running down the slope, waving his arms to attract the attention of the passing motorists.

"Hey, stop!" he yelled. "Stop! Turn up here!"

Brand cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled after Jimmy, in thunderous tones: "You idiot, come back here! That wave's traveling a hundred miles an hour! You could get caught down there and drown!"

That brought Jimmy up short. He hesitated, halfway down the hill, looking first toward the cars that still rolled unheeding around its base, then back up the slope toward the others. Then he scampered back up the slope as fast as he had gone down, and arrived panting from the exertion.

The wave from the east was visible first as an almost imperceptible alteration in the stability of the dark, vague horizon, as though it shimmered slightly above and behind the mist of light hovering around New Argos. Then it was a definite, wavering line, black as onyx.

A light, bright line, brighter and of a harder brightness

than the misty lights of New Argos, appeared, puzzlingly, *below* the silhouetted city. It broadened, its edge creeping hurriedly across the plain toward them, until suddenly, exclaiming, all at once they realized what it was.

A shallow, but deepening sheet of water was flooding the coastal plain ahead of the advancing tidal wave. The familiar streets and buildings of New Argos must already be well awash.

With the water came the birds. Even as it crept around the base of their hill and moved westward, great flights of birds, wheeling and fluttering, came from the direction of the coast and passed overhead. There was something ominous in their passage, as though winged souls fled the wrath of God.

At the same time, the refugees became aware of a sound that was not the steady drone of the wind, but rose up from behind it. It was like the thunder of surf, growing louder and deeper. Ahead of it, across the series of wide channels and flat lakes, house-dotted and tree-dotted, that was the coastland, swept the powerful, salty aroma of the ocean.

Below, the cars still splashed along the road around the hill, hurriedly. Belatedly, one of them attempted to turn up the road leading to the top of Noah's Knob. But in the water and mud, the wheels spun, the car skidded and slewed sidewise. Its engine hummed, and it stuck there, effectively blocking the upward road to any others who might have had the same idea.

Realizing their predicament, the occupants left the car, waded through knee-deep water and began laboriously climbing the rocky, slippery road, afoot. There were a man, a woman with a baby in her arms and a small boy.

The refugees had been watching for the tidal wave to extinguish New Argos. It was Jimmy, looking in a different direction, who saw it.

"It's coming from the *north!*" he shrieked.

It was a great, dark, curving wall, white-crested, that stretched from north of them on a slanting line to the coast a little north of New Argos. At first glance, it did not seem to move. Rather than advancing toward them, it seemed to *grow,* with terrifying speed.

"I'm going to help those people!" exclaimed Brand. "Come on, Ashley! Jimmy!"

He started off with great strides down the slope. Behind him, he heard Jimmy say, in a quavering voice, "I'd better stay and see about the boys."

"I'll help!" said one of the other men, starting after Brand.

Brand stopped and turned, holding up his hand.

"None of you men with families!" he commanded. "They need you. Get everybody in the house. Everybody!"

Jimmy was already hurrying toward the ark. Brand looked at Ashley. Ashley stood silently, looking down at him for a moment, then turned away.

With an imprecation, Brand started down the hill again. The family was about a third of the way up, the man leading his son by the hand and helping his wife with an arm around her waist.

The water ahead of the wave had risen swiftly, until, as far up the slope as they had gotten, it was lapping at their feet, seeming to reach for them. The woman turned and looked behind them.

"My baby!" Brand heard her scream. "Save my baby!"

For an instant, there was a tableau that seemed to pause in mid-movement. Brand hurried down the hill, the family was far below on the road, striving, faces upturned. The swelling water had drowned the foot of the hill, and the cars on the highway.

Everything below Brand seemed to stand out starkly against a solid background of blackness that had materialized as if from nowhere, and towered toward the heavens.

Then the air was full of mist and spray, that smothered him and blinded him. The increasing roar of the wave reached a howling crescendo that filled his ears with the voice of demons. He stumbled to his knees, he could not see anything around him, he no longer knew in what direction his face was turned.

The water hit him like the slap of a mighty hand. He was lifted up, his feet no longer touched ground. He tried to make swimming motions, but he was tossed and turned and tumbled.

For a moment he was suspended, his face and mouth and nose full of water, strangling, drowning. Then a harsh net caught him, halted him and lacerated him, contained him.

The water was gone.

Dazed, he opened his eyes, coughing and sputtering.

He was cradled in the branches of a tree, ten feet above

the ground and some distance from the spot where he had been when the wave struck him. He realized that, although he had been above the crest of the wave itself, it had washed up Noah's Knob, picking him up and carrying him before the tree caught him.

With some difficulty, bruised and aching, Brand climbed down. The water had scoured the slope up past the house, moving the cars and overturning two of them. The ark had been shifted a few feet up the hill, and tilted slightly. The ground was littered with trash.

Down the slope, the water had receded well below the crest of the tidal wave and was still sinking, but Brand knew that other, smaller waves would follow it until the first force of the water hurled outward by the explosion and the sudden melting of the ice had been spent.

Brand staggered to the house, slipping on the wet rocks. When he pushed open the front door, shambles met his eyes.

The upwash from the wave had smashed all the windows in one side of the house, and poured into it, sweeping people and furniture alike to the other side before it drained away. The floor was covered with trash and overturned furniture, and everyone inside was as soaked as was Brand.

Camilla came from the kitchen. She ran to him and threw wet arms around his neck.

"Thank goodness, you're alive, Brand!" she exclaimed, looking up into his face. Her corn-colored hair was plastered to her cheeks and neck, but she was as beautiful as a mermaid. "When Jimmy said you'd gone to help those people, and then the wave hit, I was afraid you'd been washed away and drowned!"

"No," he said, looking down warmly into her blue eyes. "If I'd gotten a little farther, I would have been. Poor people, they didn't make it."

Realizing that she was clinging in Brand's arms, Camilla disengaged herself gently, a little embarrassed. But she took him by the hand and led him to the fireplace, where Jimmy and two of the scouts were laboring to relight the wet wood with damp matches.

"We'll all catch pneumonia," she predicted.

"Not at all," said Jimmy briskly. "We'll get the fire going again, and then everybody can take turns drying out before bedtime."

Ashley sauntered up. Except for the dampness of his

spectacles, which he kept taking off and trying to dry, he did not appear much different wet than dry. His lank hair fell over his forehead in the customary manner, and his dark suit was just a little darker and more rumpled.

"Say, Caravel," he greeted Brand, as casually as though their last sight of each other had not been Ashley's refusal to join Brand's mission of mercy. "If you're right about the sea level going higher than a hundred feet, we're stranded here now, aren't we? That is, unless we go along with Old Man Noah on his ark."

"How do you mean?" asked Brand, although his gaze was hostile.

"Well, instead of falling back, won't the water just stay there and gradually rise until it comes up even over Noah's Knob?"

"No," answered Brand. "A lot of the moisture released by the explosion and the melting of the ice was released as vapor in the atmosphere. It will take it a while to fall as rain and snow, and bring the oceans up to their higher level.

"At the same time, the continental levels will be sinking. We'll have some time—some days, I don't know how many —to get to high ground inland."

"Well, the traffic won't be so heavy now," said Ashley cynically, and turned away.

Brand glared after him. Camilla seemed not to have heard the exchange. She was watching Jimmy and the scouts, who seemed on the verge of getting the fire started again.

It had started raining again outside now, with the passage of the wave. The water came down in torrents as night fell on the little settlement of refugees atop Noah's Knob, until it seemed that the rain alone could flood the world before morning.

10 • • •

THE SUN SHONE BRIGHT and warm on Noah's Knob. The bare trees and upper slopes were dry now, and the crispness in the air was the normal feel of early December. The sky was cloudless, except for dark, ominous banks on the horizon to the east and south. There was no wind.

The coastal plain below the hill, on all sides, lay stripped, like a mud flat. There were still channels and pools of water in low areas, glinting in the sunlight, but these were gradually draining off. The tidal wave had passed on southward.

To the east, it was impossible to tell whether any of New Argos was left standing. Under the dark cloud to seaward, the coast was blanketed in fog which drifted out and faded away on the plain across which they had traveled such a short time before.

Old Man Noah, by thrift and single-minded purpose, had amassed a tremendous amount of canned and preserved food in the basement of his log house, against the day the flood should come. Now he shared with the refugees. He gave them a day's supply each, plus containers of drinking water, to take them to the Piedmont Plateau. His own next task, he said, was to provision the ark in preparation for the further rise of the waters.

It was after noon before the refugees had things in order to start on their journey farther inland. All of them gathered around their automobiles, and the men held a final conference.

"Well, is it settled that we'll travel in caravan style?" asked one of the men, Elmer Mills, a father of three.

"It's probably the best way, don't you think?" said Craig Blackthorne. "All of us have the same goal, and if we travel together we can help each other in case of trouble."

"That makes good sense," said another of the men. "Who's going to take the lead?"

"I'll drive off first, if there are no objections," spoke up Ashley.

"Well," objected Elmer, "I know all these roads mighty well, all the way to Raleigh. I used to sell through this country. And I expect a lot of the highway markers were washed away or torn down by the wave. Don't you suppose it would be better for somebody who knows the country to go first?"

"That's right, Mr. Garland," said one of the men, in a tone indicating he had had contact with Ashley in some capacity in New Argos. "You've got the biggest car, but do you know the road?"

This brought a faint ripple of laughter. Ashley frowned slightly, and his mouth set in irritation.

Unexpectedly, it was Jimmy who spoke up in Ashley's behalf.

"I don't see that knowing the country makes any difference," he said, his nose twitching. "We're going to take the expressway, aren't we?"

There was a moment of silence. They all looked at Jimmy. Then Elmer Mills said, "The expressway? You were figuring on trying to travel the expressway?"

"What's so surprising about that?" demanded Jimmy heatedly. "The expressway's obviously the fastest way to drive."

Elmer Mills looked thoughtful, as though he were turning over Jimmy's point in his mind for the first time. Then he said slowly, "The expressway?"

"Well, now, I don't know that the expressway would be faster," said the man who had made the remark about Ashley's car.

Brand felt his temper rising. It seemed apparent to him that most of these men had gotten together, perhaps casually in small groups, and had talked this matter over beforehand. For some reason, apparently, without consulting any of the group which he was beginning to think of as "the Blackthorne party," they had made up their minds against the expressway, and, concomitantly, against Ashley's leading the caravan.

By now Brand had acquired a definite and active dislike of Ashley; and perhaps some of these New Argos men knew Ashley too, and disliked him for even better reasons. But a conspiracy of this nature to block Ashley from the lead—if that was what it was—was against logic. Brand promptly ranged himself along with Jimmy on Ashley's side.

"I don't see the objection to the expressway, if there is

any," he said sharply. "Obviously, the expressway is the fastest way to cover ground by car. If we take it, it doesn't matter who leads the caravan."

"I'll tell you what the objection is, Mr. Caravel," said the man who had answered Ashley, in a tone of more respect for Brand than he had shown for Ashley. "The expressway's got three or four overpasses per mile, where it crosses other roads."

"So? What does that have to do with it?" demanded Brand. "That makes travel faster."

"You'd be right if that wave hadn't just gone through," said Elmer Mills. "But some of us got to talking about it, and we figure that those bridges just got washed away when the wave hit. And that doesn't make the expressway any good for traveling at all, does it?"

Brand was taken aback. He had not thought of this possibility. He hesitated, then said, "Some of them may have been washed away, at that. But there are bridges on the other roads, too, and they'd be just as likely to get washed away and interrupt progress."

"Not as many of them," said Elmer stubbornly.

"They'd be over creeks and ditches, instead of over other roads," Jimmy pointed out. "It would be harder to get around a washed-out bridge than on the expressway."

"Jimmy's right," said Brand. "I think the expressway's a better bet."

"Anybody who wants to try the expressway can try the expressway," said Elmer. "Some of us have already decided we're going the other way. And I'm going first, because I know the country."

"Well, I don't think that makes good sense!" exploded Brand. "And I'm willing to go along with you, Ashley, if you want to take us on the expressway, even if we have to go alone. How about it, Jimmy?"

"I think you're right," said Jimmy soberly. "I'm with you."

"Mr. Blackthorne?"

"I hate for us not to all go together in a caravan, because that's the most sensible way of doing it," said Craig. "But if everyone can't agree on the best course, there's no help for it. Since the three of you agree, I'm willing to abide by your decision."

Elmer Mills turned away from them to the others.

"All right, fellows," he said, raising his voice. "They

don't want to go along with us. I'm heading across country, and anybody who wants to come along is welcome."

He got into his car and kicked the starter. The other men dispersed to their cars, and in a few moments all of them were winding down the hill in a caravan, leaving Ashley's limousine looming huge and alone near the log house.

The four men stood and watched them go, while the two women and Chris peered from the windows of the limousine. apparently wondering why they, too, were not in the caravan. Old Man Noah, who had stood just outside the group during the discussion, came up to join those who were left behind.

"I've been listening to them talk around some," he volunteered. "They were pretty set on not having anything more to do with you, if they could manage it, young fellow."

He was looking at Brand when he said it.

"With me?" asked Brand in astonishment. "I thought it was Ash they didn't like."

"Well, they weren't real fond of him either," said Noah. "That's just human, when a man thinks he's a little better than anybody else and shows it."

Ashley grimaced defiantly.

"We're better off going alone," he said. "Now if we'd been bound by some 'democratic' rule to all go along with the will of the majority, we'd have had to take the less sensible choice just because those men object to following a natural leader. As it is, we're not as likely to be delayed by somebody's stupid mistake."

"Unless it happens to be one of our own," offered Craig drily. "We may be as susceptible to stupid mistakes as anyone else, you know, Ashley."

"I still don't see what I've done to get all those people angry at me," said Brand, disturbed.

"They're not angry with you, young fellow," said Noah, his blue eyes gentle on Brand's face. "They just feel you're too closely connected with the science that has brought all this trouble down on the world, and they'd rather go their way without having any more to do with that."

"That's understandable, I suppose," said Brand in a low voice. "But I'd rather they'd just have said so, instead of taking the less likely course to reach safety just so they wouldn't be with me."

"They don't think they took the less likely course," said

Noah, stroking his beard, "and they may be right. Any way you go, it's going to be hard traveling across country now. So why don't all you people wait here with me? There's plenty of room for us all in the ark, and it will float us safely when the water comes up."

Brand shook his head.

"I think we ought to go on, for the sake of the women and Chris if for no other reason," he said. "It's a generous offer, but I think you're wrong. Even if your ark floats all right, it could float out to sea as easily as inland. You have no engines or sails."

"I trust in the Lord," said Noah simply. "But if you people feel you must go on, I wish you the best."

The four men shook hands with him and got into the car. Ashley started the engine and turned the limousine down the road off Noah's Knob.

The coastal plain was a sea of mud. When the limousine bearing the Blackthorne party crept, slipping and sliding, down the narrow, winding roadway and debouched onto the paved road, the change was not for the better but for the worse.

Loose ground and silt had been stirred and carried and churned and deposited all over the plain. In places there were drifts of mud, as snow drifts after a heavy fall.

The road on which they turned at the foot of Noah's Knob was swept clean in areas, as though a street cleaner had gone along it with a powerful hose. But in other spots the mud was drifted across it, sometimes a thin coating, sometimes inches deep, occasionally in great piles that nearly blocked the road.

Through the muddy areas, the tracks of the caravan that had gone down ahead of them went around the hill to the west, sometimes twisting back and forth across the road to avoid major obstacles. Although the wave seemed to have flattened everything on the coastal plain, there were still some trees, rises and irregularities in the ground that prevented it from being as absolutely flat as it appeared from above. Although the caravan had left such a short time ahead of them, it was not in sight when they rounded the bottom of Noah's Knob.

They followed the tracks of the caravan for only a short distance before reaching the turn-off onto the road that led to the expressway. Carefully, Ashley made the turn, skirted

a pool that stretched halfway across the road from a ditch that had not yet drained, and guided the limousine slowly along the road northward.

It was rough going. Not only was there mud in and across the pavement frequently, but there were tree branches and other debris which had to be avoided. Often the wheels dropped into unexpected chugholes that had been gouged from the surface of the road by the raging water.

They had not gone far before they came across the first bodies.

Camilla, sitting next to the right rear window, gasped in horror as the big car crept around a huge tree that had been uprooted, falling at an angle nearly across the road. Tangled in its crushed branches was an overturned automobile, and from its windows hung the bodies of a man and a young boy.

They had been trapped and drowned in the midst of a hopeless hegira. Whether other members of the same family lay dead also in the interior of the wrecked car, the travelers did not stop to ascertain. They drove on.

A little farther on, there was a great tangle of cars in the ditch at the left side of the road, jumbled up the bank and spilling over into the adjoining field. Evidently, the wave had caught a large number of cars together and swept them from the road like a tremendous broom. In the midst of the tangle, those in the car caught glimpses of bodies, twisted tragically.

"It was pretty bad, wasn't it?" said Craig somberly. "I don't think I actually realized how bad it must be, without seeing it."

"I expect it was a lot worse in some places," said Brand. "This is one spot, on a side road, where the wave happened to catch a group of cars. I expect the major effort to escape was along the expressway, and just the overflow took the back roads."

"Some people didn't try to get away at all," volunteered Jimmy. "We met some of them when we were hiking to Noah's Knob. They didn't believe the water would get so high."

"We ran across a few of those, too," said Brand. "Like the service station operator at Holt's Corners and the old man at the store. Their property seemed to mean more to them than their lives."

Despite the slowness of their progress over the flood-riddled road, it did not take them long to reach the expressway. At first glance, the big superhighway appeared to have suffered hardly at all from the impact of the wave. The bank sloping up to it was scored by water and littered with debris, but the cloverleaf at this point was intact.

"I told those idiots the expressway would be better!" exclaimed Ashley triumphantly. "They were just stubborn. That's why our chances of survival are so much higher than theirs."

They climbed the ramp to the eastbound lane of the expressway, and Ashley turned the limousine westward on it.

"You seem to have a perverse penchant for driving the wrong way on the expressway, Ash," remarked Brand, his tone good-humored.

Ashley smiled, a cigarette between his lips, reaching for the dashboard lighter. His face was neither unpleasant nor unhandsome when he smiled genuinely. With a twinge, Brand could see how Ashley might be a very attractive young man in Camilla's eyes when he was relaxed and at his best.

"Going the wrong way always seems to save time, one way or another," replied Ashley lightly. "This time, it just saves the time of driving under the viaduct to the right lane."

"Well," said Brand, "I hope we don't meet any more eastbound convoys."

"I doubt it," said Ashley, gesturing out the window. "They'll be using better adapted vehicles for rescue work, with the roads wrecked as they are."

Leaning forward, Brand saw through the windshield what brought Ashley's gesture. Southwest of them, at considerable distance, three helicopters fluttered eastward.

"We could get inland a lot faster if those fellows would pick us up," said Jimmy.

"Hey!" exclaimed Chris from the back. "They're going down!"

The helicopters were, indeed, losing altitude, now almost south of them.

"I know what is it!" said Jimmy. "It's the caravan. They've seen the others who left Noah's Knob ahead of us."

"Maybe we made a mistake in not going with the others,

after all," suggested Craig. "They can call in other copters and have all of them out of there in an hour or two."

"I doubt that we've lost anything, sir," said Brand. "The others will tell the copter pilots we're taking the expressway, and they'll come after us, too."

"I'd prefer to make it in the car if we can," said Ashley. "When we get to Raleigh, we're not safe yet, if you're right, Brand. We'll need transportation on into the mountains."

"Other people will have to go there, too," pointed out Craig. "When Brand tells the authorities what the situation is, I'm sure the entire population will be evacuated farther westward in an orderly manner."

By now, they had crossed over the first viaduct above a crossroad, and it was in good shape. Their preference for the expressway appeared to have justified itself. The superhighway was not so clogged with mud drifts as the lower roads, there were no residues of water overflowing onto it, and it was so far above the surrounding countryside that uprooted trees and other debris had not been washed onto it.

Tragedy had struck refugees on the expressway, too. Several times they passed wrecked cars, washed off the road and down the embankment, or into the center parkway. Some of the corpses in them were visible, others could be assumed.

With little mud and fewer chugholes, Ashley stepped down on the accelerator and sped up the limousine to normal highway speed. It purred easily along the double ribbon of concrete, well above the ruined countryside. No competing traffic came into sight, either on this lane or on the other double lane near them.

The bank of clouds that had hovered over the ocean to the east had gradually drifted over them, and now the clouds obscured the afternoon sun. The sky turned gray, and the day grew dim. A few drops of rain spattered on the windshield. The wind rose slightly behind them, helping the big limousine along its way.

Suddenly Brand shouted, "Hit the brakes! Bridge out ahead!"

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ASHLEY JAMMED DOWN THE BRAKE. The limousine bucked, nosing forward, tires squealing, and slid to a stop almost in a straight line, almost at the brink of the chasm.

From the road itself, the gap had been almost invisible. Brand's eye, fortunately, had just caught sight of a dark break in the ribbon of concrete.

The bridge, carrying the expressway over a crossroad, had vanished as though it had never been there. Twisted remnants of steel and chunks of concrete were scattered through the mud in the countryside below and to the left.

"Now what?" asked Jimmy, his nose twitching. "There's no cloverleaf exit back here to go down and cross over to the other side."

"We could go back and take the side roads until we get past it," suggested Brand. "The last crossroad we came over had a cloverleaf."

"I think there's a quicker solution," said Ashley. "The bridge over on the westbound lane isn't out."

It wasn't. It taunted them, intact, a hundred feet to their right.

"So it isn't," said Craig. "That's curious. The wave must have hit it first, since it's to northward, but it dosen't look like it was damaged, and this one is completely gone."

"I'm not sure you ought to try it, Ash, across that center parkway," said Brand. "It looks pretty muddy out there."

"The mud couldn't be deep," said Ashley confidently. "At this height, the wave would just have washed over it once."

He backed the limousine a few feet, turned it and drove it off the expressway lane into the center strip. The dead grass of the parkway formed a mat under the wheels, and for a moment they moved forward well, although the back wheels spun a little.

Then, all at once, all four wheels of the limousine seemed to break through a crust and sink, and the damage was done. The engine stopped. Ashley started it again and revved it. The back wheels spun, and the car sank deeper.

"Hold it!" said Brand. "You're making it worse!"

Ashley switched off the engine. He, Jimmy and Brand got out and surveyed their predicament.

The mud was not deep, but the low-slung automobile and its heavy wheels had been designed for driving on smooth pavement and nothing else. The ground was water-soaked enough for them to spin without any traction.

"Years ago, cars used to carry spades for this sort of emergency," remarked Brand. "But I'm not sure even a spade would help us here. If we dug out the mud deep enough for the wheels to catch hold, the axles would rest on the ground."

Chris emerged from the back seat to join the inspection party. He looked the situation over with a youthful but professional eye.

"You'd better get back in the car, Chris," said Jimmy. "It's beginning to rain harder."

Chris obeyed. But he rolled down the window to stick his head out and comment, "If we were out in the woods, we'd make some mats out of tree limbs and bushes to put under the wheels, wouldn't we, Jimmy? Like the time the troop station wagon got stuck at camp, remember?"

"That's right, Chris, but we're not in the woods now," replied Jimmy, in a tone that was on the verge of irritation. The rain was splattering on them steadily now, and running down their collars. "There aren't even any bushes on the expressway right of way."

Brand snapped his fingers.

"The boy's basic idea is sound though," he said. "There aren't any trees or bushes within reach, but we may profit from the very cause of our trouble. Couldn't we make a temporary surface for the wheels from some of the steel rods that were in the washed-out bridge?"

"The wheels would spin on steel worse than in the mud," said Ashley, "and, besides, the rods look like they're too twisted to do us much good. But we might use some of that broken concrete, if we can find enough of it in small enough chunks."

The three of them crossed the pavement and clambered down the steep bank from the expressway roadbed. They

scattered through the muddy area south of the gap, picking up chunks of the destroyed bridge which were small enough to handle.

When all three of them had returned with insecure armloads, struggled up the slippery bank in the rain and lost most of what they had picked up, they took counsel with one another. By way of solution, they opened the trunk of the car and removed the food Noah had given them from its burlap bag. Ashley stationed himself at the top of the expressway bank and Jimmy halfway down, and Brand filled the bag with small chunks and passed it up. Ashley emptied it beneath the back wheels of the car.

At last, with a combination of concrete chunks and gravel scraped from the expressway shoulder, they were ready for a try. Everyone got out of the car and pushed in the rain, while Ashley gunned the engine in reverse.

For a moment the wheels spun, the tires smoked, then they caught, scattering gravel, and with a lurch the car hurtled backward, almost overshooting the pavement.

Wet, spattered all over with mud, the refugees climbed back into the vehicle and Ashley turned it back eastward.

But it was not necessary to go back to the cloverleaf to get to the other side of the expressway after all. A quarter of a mile back, they came upon one of those asphalted crossover strips by which maintenance workers had traversed the median. This took them to the westbound lane, and a few minutes later they passed the scene of the disastrous effect that had cost them at least an hour.

"I'm hungry," said Chris, after they had driven perhaps ten miles at a careful pace, without coming upon any more washed-out bridges.

"I'm beginning to get hungry, too," said Harriet. "It's been quite a while since we had lunch."

"Now, Mother," remonstrated Camilla. "It's not much after five o'clock, and the food's in the trunk. There's no point in one of the fellows getting soaking wet to get to it now. We can wait until it stops raining."

"I don't think it's going to stop any more today, the way it looks," said Brand. "Ash, why don't you pull off at the next cloverleaf and drive under the viaduct. That'll give us a chance to eat before it gets completely dark."

Ashley complied. In the protection of the viaduct, they stretched, opened cans of tuna, salmon and pork and beans, and ate with their fingers while the rain poured down

outside. Occasionally, the wind twisted to blow a chill spray in upon them.

In the steady rain, the drainage ditches along the crossroad were full, fed also by concrete-lined channels curving from the expressway roadbed above. Swift streams of water hurried through their shelters on both sides of the pavement.

"How long do you suppose it will be until the water rises and covers all this country between here and Raleigh?" Ashley asked Brand.

"I don't know," replied Brand. "The ocean's undoubtedly risen quite a bit, and I expect New Argos is flooded to a depth of fifteen or twenty feet by now. But the land rises at the rate of about a foot to the mile through this part of the country, so we should still be twenty or thirty feet above the rising water. This rain we're getting is part of the big mass of water that was released into the atmosphere from the icecaps, and it wouldn't surprise me for it to rain forty days and forty nights steadily, as in the Biblical flood."

Camilla was standing at the rear of the car, her hand on the fender, looking out over the rainy, misty countryside.

"Old Man Noah wasn't so crazy, after all, was he?" she said thoughtfully.

Brand went to her side.

"No," he said, "coincidentally or not, he predicted what was coming and prepared for it in the only way he knew how. Whether his way of preparing for it is better than any other remains to be seen, but he's proved it better than the way taken by thousands of people who have already drowned."

Camilla shuddered.

"It's a terrible thing," she said. "It's easy to understand why those simple people back on the Knob had a revulsion against the whole scientific project that brought it on. They can even be forgiven for their reaction against you, Brand."

At his silence, realizing how he might interpret her words, she looked quickly into his face, took his hand and squeezed it.

"I don't mean to imply that I feel that way at all," she said gently. "I know you're not at fault in any way."

She turned back to the bleak countryside.

"But it's sad to see this beautiful country now, nothing

but mud," she said. "It's sad to know that before long it will all be under water. And it's sad to know that the home I lived in all my life is all wet and ruined and covered by the ocean."

Brand started to reply, but stopped at the sound of a rising hum that was not the wind, nor yet the drum of the rain. Camilla heard it, too. She tensed, her hand still in Brand's.

The hum grew to a roar. Everyone in the group was standing, listening, wondering. Then Brand realized.

"The copters!" he shouted. "They've come back for us!"

"They can't see us under here!" exclaimed Camilla. "They won't know we're here!"

All of them, even Harriet, ran out from beneath the viaduct, into the drenching rain, faces upturned to the sky.

There were three helicopters, perhaps the same ones they had seen earlier. Fluttering slowly through the rain, they hovered low over the expressway, moving slowly eastward along its lanes, searchlights sweeping the big road.

But they had already passed over the viaduct, and were a hundred feet back toward New Argos by the time the refugees emerged into the open.

"Hey!" shouted Jimmy, jumping up and down and waving his arms.

All of them waved their arms and shouted, dancing around on the pavement. Ashley tried to clamber up the bank to the expressway, but the mud was too slick.

The helicopters receded steadily eastward, toward the coast, and disappeared in the rain and mist.

"They missed us," said Brand in deep disappointment. "They must have been watching the expressway ahead of them so closely, in this rain, that they didn't bother to look behind them."

"What will they do when they don't find us?" asked Craig. "After all, the others must have told them we were trying to escape by way of the expressway."

"When they see some of the washed-out bridges, they may think we've had to go back to the side roads," said Brand. "They may concentrate their search there and not check the expressway. But they won't be able to search anywhere long, because it's nearly too dark."

Dejected and depressed, the group got back into the limousine and returned to the expressway.

Progress was even slower now, as night closed in. In the

dark, complicated by heavy rain, Ashley had to creep along, with the lights at low beam, lest they come unexpectedly upon a washed-out bridge.

Three times they did, and once they came to a spot where a segment of the pavement itself had been torn out and a gap dug in the expressway's roadbed, perhaps by the impact of some object hurled across it by the force of the tidal wave.

In two cases, they were able to get around the hiatus by getting to the other side of the expressway, once at a crossover and once by going back to a cloverleaf. But the gap in the pavement had been slashed through both sides of the expressway, and one of the bridges was washed out on both sides. In these cases, there was nothing to do but take to the countryside.

The network of side roads was not in quite so bad shape through this area farther inland as it had been around Noah's Knob. But there were still washed-out places, areas covered with mud and spots blocked by debris. By the time they had negotiated the last of the four expressway washouts, they had driven nearly all night, Brand and Ashley taking turns at the wheel.

In the back seat, the Blackthorne family slept for a good deal of this time. Jimmy, who could drive but was afraid to try to handle the limousine under these conditions, napped some. Brand and Ashley, remaining awake, carried on a conversation in low tones throughout the night, Jimmy joining in occasionally.

In this conversation, there was none of the natural animosity the two men had found for each other, but a good deal of friendliness.

It occasioned Brand considerable thought. He and Ashley saw things from diametrically different viewpoints, and he disagreed violently with Ashley's arrogant, devil-take-the-hindmost approach to the problem of survival. In addition, he recognized that, as Ashley had foreseen, they were basically competitors for Camilla's affections—a competition in which Jimmy also was involved—and there was no real guarantee that under the stress of the current conditions she might not decide that Ashley's philosophy was preferable to her.

Yet, when the two of them were essentially alone together among a group of sleeping and sleepy people for whom they bore joint responsibility, a genuine camaraderie, not merely

an armed truce, existed between them. They talked quite frankly with each other and revealed much of themselves to each other. Such was the power of a common peril to bring men together.

About three-thirty in the morning, they came upon another break in the expressway. When Ashley stopped the car at its edge, both of them realized that this was something different.

The car lights, shining out through the shimmer of the falling rain, did not pick out an opposite bank and a continuing roadway across a gap ahead of them. They shone out into space, as though the world ended here.

They were once more in the westbound lane, and looking southward to the other lane, they saw the same situation. The eastbound lane converged to join theirs here, and it ended abruptly. Unable to see downward into the gap ahead of them, they could discern only a wall of rain descending into space.

Jimmy stirred on the seat at Brand's right.

"What's the matter?" he asked sleepily. "Why did we stop?"

"Because we had to," said Brand shortly. "Ash, I think we're going to have to see what we're up against here, before turning back."

Ashley got out of the car, and Brand followed him, crawling under the steering wheel. Jimmy, now completely awake, got out on his side.

The three of them walked to the edge of the washout.

Below them was no mere crossroad. The bank sloped down to a river, swollen with flood waters, spattered with the falling rain, stretching out beyond visibility into the blank wall of rain ahead of them.

"This couldn't be the Northeast Cape Fear River," said Ashley in astonishment. "I'm sure we crossed that, not far this side of Noah's Knob."

"I don't know what it could be," said Brand. "How far do you suppose we are from New Argos?"

"We ought to be to Raleigh by now," said Jimmy. "We've been driving all night."

"You've been asleep and missed some of it," retorted Brand. "A lot of that driving was winding around all over the countryside, trying to find a way to get back to the expressway."

"I doubt that we've covered more than fifty or sixty

miles along the expressway itself," said Ashley. "I don't know what river this could be. It may be just a creek, that we didn't notice when we were driving the expressway in the past."

"It's a river now," said Brand. "From the looks of it, I doubt we'll have any better luck finding a bridge on any of the other roads either."

"Well, I'm for catching a few hours' sleep before going back and trying," said Ashley. "We'll have a better chance in the daytime anyhow."

12 • • •

THEY WERE ALL ASLEEP, curled and crowded in the two seats of the big car, as the rain dimmed the midmorning and drummed a lullaby. They were all asleep, and they were all awakened at once by the roar of engines.

Brand's eyes came open in time to see, through the rain-distorted windshield, a helicopter swoop across the river toward them. It passed no more than thirty feet above them. Behind the car, it seemed to slow and hover for a moment —although that may have been an illusion—then the sound of its engines faded along the expressway to the east.

"He couldn't have missed seeing us this time!" exclaimed Brand. "We're sitting right in the middle of the highway!"

"We're not moving," said Jimmy. "Maybe he thought it was an abandoned car."

"What does he expect us to do?" demanded Brand indignantly. "Drive on into the river or stand out in the rain, just in case a copter comes along? He should have stopped to check!"

"Maybe he'll be back," suggested Camilla.

"Well, we'd better not count on it," said Brand. "We have no way of knowing how close the ocean is behind us by now, or how fast it's moving in. We'd better not waste any time trying to find another bridge."

"Have you tried the radio, to see if you could get any reports?" asked Craig.

"We tried it several times last night, while you were all asleep," said Ashley. "We didn't get anything but static. I don't know whether there's something wrong with the radio, or it's the weather."

He started the engine and moved the limousine up close to the edge of the broken pavement. In the daytime, they could see the river boiling below them, and the other shore through the rain. It was a small stream, only seventy or eighty feet wide, and it may have been a mere creek in normal times; but for any chance they had of getting across it at this point now, it might as well have been the Atlantic.

The stream wound away from them to the right through flat, muddy terrain stretching away into the misty distance, in which only the remnants of a few shattered trees remained upright.

The car trembled.

"What's that?" exclaimed Camilla in alarm.

A low, deep rumble intruded itself on their ears, growing gradually in volume and tone. For a moment, they thought the helicopter was coming back.

Then Brand shouted, "Reverse, Ash! Back it up! The bank!"

Ashley threw the gear into reverse and jammed down on the accelerator. The tires spun and caught, and the car moved backward, but slowly, spinning, lurching, shaking like a drunken thing.

Ahead of them, the bank crumbled away a little, and some of the pavement broke off. The backing car slewed slightly sidewise, nearly ran off the pavement. Ashley straightened it with a powerful effort, and it continued backward.

But the ground was shaking and bucking. The car felt as though it were being shaken to pieces. Its passengers were tossed together and against the sides like rag dolls.

"It isn't j-j-just the bank," said Jimmy, his teeth chattering as his head was thrown from side to side. "S-s-something's h-h-happening!"

It wasn't just the bank. Only a foot or two had crumbled at the edge of the chasm, and they were safely forty or fifty feet back from the edge now.

The shuddering stopped. Everything was still. There was another sudden, violent convulsion, that lasted for a few seconds, then things were still again.

"Earthquake!" exclaimed Brand. "That's what it was!

The land is settling to restore the balance from the rise of the polar areas."

The pavement before and behind them was cracked and shattered now, like the shell of an egg that had been dropped. Smooth and level a few moments before, now it undulated in great hillocks and depressions, and portions of the expressway's supporting bank had slid away, leaving deep gullies down the sides.

"It's going to be pretty hard driving back to the last cloverleaf now," said Ashley dubiously.

"It's too late anyhow," replied Brand quietly. "Look!"

Back to the east, across the muddy flatland to their right, now buckled and crisscrossed with cracks, a white line approached. As it came nearer, they saw it was the foamy front of an advancing wave, not high and terrifying like the tidal wave, but as swift and steady as the advance of a breaker on a sandy beach.

It did not threaten the expressway itself, atop its raised roadbed. But it swept steadily across the nearly level countryside, leaving only a few hillocks, treetops and raised islands of varying areas, until it reached the river, merged with it, obliterated it and moved on beyond into the rainy distance.

The surface of the water was rough and choppy, but only with the wind and rain. As far as their eyes could reach, the expanse of water stretched out, covering all the country that once had been farmland and woodland.

They were on a raised causeway which projected behind them into what was now the ocean. It was a causeway interrupted by a seventy-foot gap ahead of them.

"Can everybody in here swim?" asked Brand.

"I can't," answered Harriet tragically.

"I'm afraid I'm not very good at it," admitted Ashley. "I was always better at diving."

"I don't think diving's going to be necessary if we're marooned here very much longer," said Brand.

"Can we go back and get around it somehow?" asked Harriet in terror.

"Not any more," said Brand. "The countryside off the expressway is flooded, and if we went back far enough on the expressway we'd run under water on it, too."

"It's hard to believe it's actually the ocean, this far inland," murmured Craig.

"I don't know just where we are, or how far we are

above the old sea level here," said Brand, "but this is very much the way it would have been finally if the coastal areas had been flooded according to plan. As it is, the land is sinking, and we'll have more earthquakes from time to time as the strain of the sinking crust causes it to buckle."

He looked thoughtfully at his companions in flight.

Ashley's pose of self-confidence had been badly shaken, and he was obviously frightened now. The lank lock of hair fell down over the heavy rims of his spectacles, and he puffed nervously at a cigarette, burning it up without tasting it.

Jimmy seemed stunned. His always unruly hair stuck out in every direction, and his brown eyes stared at his hands, a little glazed. His thin face was drawn.

Craig Blackthorne sat quietly, solidly, his mild eyes gazing out through his spectacles at the expanse of water that trapped them. He removed the spectacles and polished them thoughtfully with his handkerchief.

Harriet, after her first onset of terror, had settled into serenity and resignation. With one hand, she adjusted her gray hair, with the other she stroked her husband's short-cropped head.

Camilla's lovely face was animated and flushed, her eyes alight. She seemed more excited than frightened. And Chris was definitely excited. The boy could hardly sit still.

A varied group of humans facing a crisis variably, thought Brand wryly, and wondered how he himself looked to them. After these hours together, he felt that he had known all of them all his life, and it was hard to conceive that some or all of them might be dead within minutes if the earth shook again.

"We're going to have to swim," he said slowly. "There may be some undertow still in the river, but we should be able to make it if those of us who are good swimmers will pair up to support those who can't swim well or at all."

"What about transportation when we get to the other side?" asked Craig. "Obviously, we can't get the car across."

"We're going to have to walk. It will be a long, hard hike through the rain, especially for you and Mrs. Blackthorne, but we've got to get inland, beyond the extent of the tidal wave, and find transportation on to the mountains."

Reluctantly, one by one, they got out of the car in the

rain, and went up to the bank of the stream in a group. It was no longer a stream, but a gap of water, lying quiet and flat between them and the other shore.

"Hey, I think I hear another copter coming!" exclaimed Chris.

The sound of engines approached from the other side. But it was no copter this time.

For a moment, they thought they were seeing two big boats, moving along *on top of* the expressway across the gap. When the vehicles rolled up to the bank, they saw they were military DUKWs, or amphibious vehicles. Raincoated men in military headgear manned them.

The "ducks" stopped at the broken edge of the expressway. The stranded refugees waved and shouted, and several of the soldiers waved back.

Then the streamlined ducks turned down the bank, rolled swiftly to the water's edge and plunged in, riding easily as they switched gears and nosed across the gap.

Ten minutes later, the refugees aboard, one of the vehicles was back across the water and headed westward along the expressway. The other duck had gone on eastward.

The duck, on high wheels, was able to negotiate the rough, buckled and cracked expressway pavement as the limousine could not have, even if they could have gotten it across the gap.

"The copter spotted you there and radioed back," said the sergeant in charge of the vehicle, a square-faced, mustached man with a Regular Army air about him. "It couldn't have taken all of you at once, and it's hard for the copters to fly in this weather."

"You came just in time," said Jimmy, his nose twitching. "We were getting ready to try to swim across."

The sergeant shook his head.

"You didn't need to do that," he said. "You were safe as bugs there until you could be rescued. According to the copter surveys, the water's nearly up to the hundred-foot level with that last jump, and it won't ever get up over the superhighway road bed that far inland."

"That's where you're wrong," said Brand earnestly. "The water's going to get a lot higher than everyone figured it would. Even Greensboro will be flooded."

The sergeant looked at him, and Brand could read in his eyes the words the state trooper had spoken to Ashley: "Buddy, you crazy or something?" But the sergeant merely

said, precisely, "The elevation of Greensboro is 838 feet."

This was hardly the man to whom to make his scientific explanation, Brand realized. So he satisfied himself with saying, "When we get to Raleigh, we want to make arrangements to catch a train or a plane farther inland."

The sergeant looked at him curiously.

"Buddy, I don't think you realize what conditions are through here right now," he said. "The place is overrun with refugees, and they're running wild. For your own protection, the government will house you until plans can be worked out to resettle you."

"For our protection?" repeated Brand, struck by the ominous sound of the words. "You mean we won't be free to travel on inland?"

The sergeant gestured at rifles racked on the interior of the vehicle.

"Them guns are loaded, and there's good reason for it," he replied. "If you folks tried to travel across country without the army's protection, you wouldn't last two hours."

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In effect, they were prisoners.

They were not taken to Raleigh, but to a small town somewhere southeast of it, some distance off the expressway. No one bothered to tell them the name of the town, and when Brand asked one of the soldiers, he said he didn't know.

They were unloaded at a small stone building which had been the post office. Inside, they were checked in by a woman corporal, who took down the personal information they gave and turned it over to another woman in uniform to be typed in triplicate.

A third woman soldier escorted them to a building nearby, which had been a department store. The army apparently had taken this over from its owner, because military personnel there checked their sizes and outfitted all of them with new, dry clothing.

Their uniformed feminine escort then herded them to the front door, where they waited on the sidewalk under the awning—for transportation, she informed them. The streets were quiet and orderly. The only people on them wore uniforms, and the only vehicles were military vehicles.

"Why can't we be allowed to find out own transportation?" demanded Ashley, who had recovered his aplomb somewhat by now. "Why herd us into a place that's been taken over by the army, when all we wanted was to be released to go our way peacefully?"

"All larger towns and cities through this region have been taken over by the army," said the young lady. "No civilians are permitted unrestricted movement at this time."

"That's pretty fast work, isn't it?" asked Jimmy. "The tidal wave just hit two days ago, and already the army's taken over."

"The army was probably all set and waiting for the chance," said Ashley angrily. "Senator Finstruther had been warning the country for years that the military brass was worming its way into control of the government, and nobody paid any attention to him."

"It had to be done, and it had to be done fast," said their escort. "Military law was imposed yesterday. By that time, refugees were running loose in mobs, destroying homes, breaking into stores and killing people. You don't realize how bad it can get when millions of refugees pour into areas that aren't prepared to receive them."

"You mean you've taken control this thoroughly, this quickly?" asked Ashley.

"The towns and the main highways," said the woman. "It may be weeks before we get the whole countryside under control. That's why you have to be kept under guard and not allowed to travel, for your own protection and that of others."

"It seems to me the civil police could have been given a chance to handle the situation first," grumbled Ashley.

"There aren't weeks to spare!" said Brand sharply. "I'd like to see your commanding officer. I have some important information he needs to know about."

"You may request permission to see him, after you've been assigned to quarters," she replied.

"Quarters" turned out to be houses in the suburbs of the small town. A bus, driven by a soldier, picked them up in front of the department store. It was already more than

half full of civilians, apparently gathered from somewhere else in town, and by the time it reached them, several other groups of newly outfitted people had emerged from the department store to wait with them.

The suburban area to which they were taken was divided into sectors, separated from each other by hastily erected barbed-wire barricades. The street entrance to each barricade was guarded by sandbag breastworks, manned by a single sentry.

In the first sector, Camilla, Chris and their parents were ordered off the bus, along with several other obvious family groups. Waiting soldiers escorted them off afoot.

In the next sector, the remaining women aboard were unloaded, and in the third the remaining men left the bus.

Half a dozen soldiers were waiting when they alighted. As the bus drove off, the newcomers were lined up. Their names were called out and they were divided up into small groups. Each group was led away by a pair of soldiers.

Ashley, Brand and Jimmy constituted the third group.

The two soldiers assigned to them led them silently down the street through the rain. It occurred to Brand how ridiculous this all was; they had been carefully outfitted with dry clothing, and now they were being led through the rain, so that their dry clothing got all wet.

The soldiers turned in at a small brick house on the edge of town. A nameplate on the mailbox said "Jones."

"Here's home for a while," said one of the men when they were on the porch, "and you have it all to yourselves for now. But if you want to stay together, you'd better grab beds in the same room, because you'll have company."

"Yeah," said the other one. "You'd better stick close to the house and yard, too—and don't do any damage here, if you know what's good for you. Chow is in an hour."

"Where do we eat it?" asked Jimmy. "I'm hungry. We didn't have any breakfast."

"It'll be announced over the PA system," said the second soldier. "When you hear it, line up out here on the sidewalk, and a truck'll come by to take you to the mess hall."

"Don't miss the truck if you want anything to eat," said the first soldier. "You'll get an orientation session tonight after late chow."

"Hey, wait!" said Brand, as they started to walk away. "I want to see your colonel. Or your general, if you have one."

The soldiers stopped.

"Whaddya think we got in this town, an army?" demanded the first soldier. "There ain't but two companies here. You won't find even a major any closer than Raleigh."

"A couple of companies? I thought I saw more than that in the streets," said Brand. "Well, take me to your company commander."

"Whaddya want to see him for?" demurred the first soldier. "He's pretty busy. He ain't got time to talk to every refugee that comes in."

"There's some information he needs to pass on up through channels, as fast as he can," said Brand desperately. "If you'll check the roster, you'll find I'm a scientist from Project People."

The soldier pulled from his pocket the papers that the bus driver had handed down when the passengers emerged. He scratched through them, poring.

"You're Caravel, Brand?" he asked, at last.

"That's right."

"Well, I don't know." The soldier hesitated. "The first sergeant will give me hell if I try to bother the captain for nothing. But there's a lieutenant attached here, from division G-2. I'll see if he'll talk to you. That's supposed to be his job, anyway."

The soldiers left, walking away in step through the rain, and the three men went into the house.

The army had obviously come into this area after the tidal wave had passed, for it had been here. Its crest had washed through the house, as they suspected already from the debris-strewn yard.

But only the weak, dying wash of the wave could have reached here, near the limit of its extent. They had seen no houses destroyed anywhere in the town. Here, a few windows had been patched at the bottom. The furniture was water-damaged, but still here.

In addition, every room, including the kitchen, contained from four to six army cots, with folded olive drab blankets tossed on them.

"I hope I can convince them fast action's necessary," said Brand. "If the land is settling as fast as it appears to be, from the way it came up back there at the river, it won't be but a few days before it reaches here."

"Sure you can," said Jimmy optimistically. "Their job is

to save as many lives as they can. Since you were with the project, they'll know you know what you're talking about."

"I don't know," said Ashley darkly. "But if you can't, we're not hanging around to drown. We'll get out of here."

"How?" demanded Brand. "We can't take on the army with our bare hands."

"We have a little more than that," said Ashley. Reaching into his inner coat pocket, he produced the small pistol he had carried in the limousine's glove compartment.

"How did you smuggle that in?" demanded Jimmy in astonishment, his nose twitching. "They searched us at the department store."

"I had it stuck in my sock when they searched us," said Ashley. "As soon as they told me the army was in charge, I got suspicious. When we changed clothes in the dressing room, I just transferred it to the coat on my new suit, and here it is."

Brand shook his head.

"That's not much good against machine guns and bayonets," he said.

Leaving the other two, he walked through the kitchen to the screened-in back porch.

It was a nice little house, and had been tastefully furnished. He wondered what had happened to its owners. Had the Joneses drowned here, or had they gone on west, beyond the reach of the wave? Perhaps, the army being what it was, they had survived here, but were billeted in another part of town while strangers occupied their home.

They were in the suburbs on the eastern side of town, and, by chance, the back yard of this house marked the end of the urban area barricaded and occupied by the army. Just beyond the house, at the end of the yard, was the barricade of rolled barbed wire. Patrolling it wearily through the mud and rain was a single raincoated sentry, carrying a rifle, bayonet fixed, now about seventy yards away and going in the other direction.

The land sloped gently to eastward here. There were a few scattered houses beyond the barbed wire, but they appeared to be deserted. There was a lot of debris piled up against bushes, buildings and fences, but trees were still standing and Brand could not see that any buildings had been destroyed.

Through the heavy rain and mist he could not see into the distance, but he imagined the water, far away and below, slowly rising toward them.

"Convenient, isn't it?" said Ashley, coming from the kitchen to Brand's side.

"What do you mean?"

"We don't have to make our way through town. One roll of barbed wire, and then freedom."

"Leaving Cam and the rest of the family here?"

"We'll take care of that when the time comes. I'm as interested in her as you are. But we can't do anything as long as we're in custody ourselves."

Somewhat to Brand's surprise, he was called to see the lieutenant from division intelligence in midafternoon. Meanwhile, they had been hauled away in a truck to eat lunch, at big tables in a school building, and hauled back by truck.

A private came for Brand in a jeep, and took him through the barricades to the lieutenant's office, in a small downtown office building. The lieutenant was a headquarters man; his uniform was crisp and neatly pressed, and he toyed with a pencil as he listened to Brand's detailed explanation.

"Very well, Mr. Caravel," he said, without much interest, when Brand had finished. "If you'll dictate a memo to one of the clerks, I'll have it copied and see that it is transmitted to division G-2 tomorrow. My superiors will have to make the decision as to whether it is of sufficient consequence to transmit to higher headquarters."

"I think it's 'of sufficient consequence' for me to explain it to someone who understands it in Washington right now," replied Brand sharply. "The people in your higher headquarters probably won't comprehend it any better than you apparently do, and we don't have time for any red tape. Any further submergence will flood this whole area, and the lives of millions of people are at stake."

"Millions have died, Mr. Caravel," said the officer, unimpressed. "And there is no more Washington. The government was evacuated to Kansas City before the wave hit, and we're operating out of a provisional and almost autonomous Southeastern command centered in Atlanta."

"Well, can't you get me a telephone line to some qualified official of Project People in Kansas City then? We had a headquarters in Washington. Surely it was moved, too."

"Sir," said the lieutenant, fixing him with a steady gaze,

"by your own information, you were not a major officer in the project. What you have said may be important and, if it is, I'm sure it will be recognized as such, and expedited. But we have hundreds of ideas and solutions presented to us by refugees, some of them sensible, some of them not. We can't give them all a direct line to the provisional White House. We have to maintain some order in a country gone mad or millions more will die, and not by flood."

Dejectedly, Brand dictated his report to a woman corporal, and was escorted back to the brick house in the compound.

"All right, Ash, you're probably right," he said. "The whole eastern section of the country may be under water before that report of mine reaches a pigeonhole in Kansas City."

"Good!" said Ashley briskly, his eyes gleaming. "Jimmy and I have been tearing up planks from the back porch floor while you were gone, and nailing them together. We'll be ready to move as soon as it's dark."

"What on earth have you been tearing up the back porch for?" demanded Brand curiously.

"That barbed wire was laid down hurriedly and there isn't much of it," replied Ashley, "but there's too much of it to jump.

"I figure on walking over it."

14 • • •

THE ORIENTATION SESSION was over by eight o'clock that evening. It was conducted by a weary and bored second lieutenant. Several score civilians were present to be oriented, and Ashley, Brand and Jimmy were able to sit with the Blackthorne family.

Jimmy sat next to Camilla, and whispered to her their plan to try to escape, and why.

"She promised not to tell the rest of the family just

yet," Jimmy reported later, when the three of them were back at the house. "I told her we'd be back to get them out somehow."

At nine o'clock, taps sounded over the public address system, which had a loudspeaker rigged to a telephone pole at the nearest street intersection. From their orientation session, they knew this meant "lights out" throughout the compound. They obeyed and went to the windows.

The whole residential area around them was dark, except for a few houses. In a moment, lights blinked out in them, too, leaving only the street lights shining in the incessant rain. A jeep drove slowly down the street, its two occupants checking with flashlights and ready guns.

The three men went through the kitchen and stepped gingerly to the ground which previously had been covered by the porch floor.

"It takes the sentry twenty minutes to make a one-way trip," said Ashley. "We timed him this afternoon, because we didn't want him to hear us hammering. Jimmy, watch and let us know when he crosses under the street light going the other way."

There was silence, while Ashley and Brand fumbled for and found the ends of the "platform" that had been constructed. About six feet long and four wide, it was merely a rectangle made of floor planking nailed to two heavier timbers.

"Now!" said Jimmy. "There he goes."

Hurriedly, Ashley and Brand maneuvered the platform through the screen door and over the steps, Ashley going first. Jimmy emerged to help them.

Awkwardly, they carried it down the slope of the back yard, keeping wary eyes toward the street light at the right, past which the sentry had disappeared into the darkness a few moments before.

They reached the barbed wire and set the heavy contraption down on the ground to rest for a moment.

"Halt!" snapped a voice from the darkness.

It came from their *left,* not more than thirty feet away!

"Halt and be recognized!"

They could see no one in the rainy darkness, but a flashlight came on, pinning them in its beam.

"Two sentries!" murmured Brand, raising his hands above his head in resignation. "We didn't count on that."

"Damned soldiers!" muttered Ashley at Brand's side.

There was a sharp crack, a flash that almost seared Brand's arm. The flashlight dropped to the ground, and a groan came from the darkness.

There was no answering shot.

"Got him!" Exclaimed Ashley triumphantly. "Let's get going!"

They picked up the platform and threw it across the high roll of barbed wire. One by one, Ashley first, they jumped upon it, mashing the wire down. They stood there in trio for a moment, teetering springily, then, together, leaped over the remaining wire to the ground beyond.

"Hey!" shouted a voice some distance away. The other sentry appeared under the street light, running back toward them, his rifle ready. It was doubtful that he could see them in the darkness.

Together they fled down the slope, away from the compound. Behind them there was a single shot, and a flashlight probed futilely after them.

"Let's head south and swing around the town," said Ashley. "They'll have an armored car out looking for us on this side pretty soon."

"We'll never make it," panted Jimmy. "They'll scour the countryside for us."

"Nonsense!" snapped Ashley. "There aren't enough of them to make a thorough search, and they have to guard the town. They'll probably think were holing up in one of these houses out here, but if we can get far enough from town by morning, they won't even try to find us any more."

They kept going directly away from the town until its lights were barely visible on the slope above them. They saw car lights come up to the barricade they had crossed, and a mass of searchlights beamed down the slope toward them, but they were out of range by now.

They turned southward and slogged through the rain and mud across fields and through thickets. A helicopter came from over the town, a powerful beam of light turned down on the ground, and crisscrossed the area through which they had passed. Once it approached and went over them, but they lay down under a hedge until the searchlight had gone on.

"They haven't a chance," said Ashley, as the three got up and moved on. "They have to have light to find us, and we can see light coming."

The helicopter stayed in the air for nearly an hour, its

light searching the ground, but they moved steadily farther from the area of its search. They stayed in the fields, but near the edges, where the shelter of trees and bushes was more likely to be found.

They skirted the town at a distance, and when they deemed they had reached its opposite side, they struck out away from it, in a direction they thought to be westward.

The going was hard. They climbed fences, forced their way through underbrush, stumbled through ditches. At last, they hit a small, muddy road running in the general direction they wished to take, and felt safe enough to stay on it.

They had been told that the countryside was swarming with refugees, some of them armed and dangerous. They saw none afoot, this rainy night, but they did not take the risk of turning off to take shelter in any of the houses or barns they passed.

They did not want to walk all night, nor did they want to get that far from the town. The Blackthornes were still back there to be rescued. At last, they discerned a straw-stack in a field next to the road, and climbed the fence to reach it.

It was soggy, and smelled moldy, but when they dug out a cave in the side away from the road, it protected them from the rain that was falling. Wet from the rain and scratched from the bushes through which they had passed, they lay down close together for warmth. Soon all three were alseep.

Brand awakened first. It was morning—he did not know what time, because his wristwatch had stopped. The rain had slackened until it was no more than a light drizzle, but the sky was still heavily overcast.

He sat up, shivering. December weather, even this far south, was no weather to be out in, in no more than a wet suit. The temperature must be no higher than the upper forties.

Brand looked down at his sleeping companions. Ashley lay on his stomach, his head turned to one side. Without his spectacles, the lock of hair falling over his brow made him look very youthful, like a boy, and there was a strangely wistful twist to his lips. Jimmy lay on his side, curled in a ball, his hand covering his nose like a bear's paw. His unruly hair had straw sticking out of it.

A strange trio, for a strange outlaw escapade, thought Brand. His memory turned back to the night he had met

them, in the peaceful atmosphere of Camilla's house. Only four nights ago? It seemed like years. And his months in the Arctic seemed so long in the past that it was almost as though they had never been.

It was a changed world they were in now, from the comfortable, well-ordered world of four nights ago. It was a world destroyed, a world still being destroyed.

Here was he, who had been a young scientist working for the future welfare of mankind. And there was Ashley, who had been a well-established and wealthy young businessman, his own future assured. And Jimmy, who had found his most attractive vocation in teaching boys and remaining much of a boy himself. Now all three were human flotsam, fighting time and the elements for survival, and they were outlaws, fighting what was left of organized society for the survival of their detained companions.

A changed world, a weird world, in which the unexpected was what was most to be expected.

He woke them up.

"Let's get out of here," he said. "We've got to work out plans to get the Blackthornes out of that town."

They got up and peered cautiously around the edge of the strawstack. At the other end of the field was a farmhouse in a yard, with a barn behind it. There was no sign of life about it.

"Hey, I'm hungry," said Jimmy. "Do you suppose we could find anything to eat there?"

"We might get shot, or get our throats cut, if we just walk on up to that place," warned Brand. "There could be some refugees in there."

"Well, we've got to take a chance some time," said Ashley, pulling out his small pistol.

"Let's wait and watch it a while," counseled Brand. "There's no use rushing into anything, and if there's anyone there we may see some signs of them before long."

"Well, look," said Jimmy, peering farther around the stack. "We can get to better shelter. I wish we'd seen that last night."

There was a tin-roofed lean-to within ten feet of the strawstack, a sheep shed or pig shed. The ground appeared reasonably dry under the roof.

They hurried to it, stooping and trying to keep it between them and the farmhouse as much as possible. The roof was too low for them to stand, but they sat down to-

gether on the reasonably dry ground and discussed the situation.

"Just how we can get into the middle of a guarded town and get them out, I don't know," said Ashley. "We don't even know the name of the town, or the lay of the land around it."

"The name of it is Reston," said Jimmy. "It's—it was a little farming community that built up on a crossroad near the expressway."

"How did you find that out?" asked Brand in astonishment.

"From some of the people at supper last night," replied Jimmy. His nose twitched. "Some of those people interned there used to live in the town. I got a general idea of the layout of the roads and the best route to take west, if we don't want to travel the expressway."

"We can't very well, with the army in control," said Brand.

"That's not helping us much with getting in and getting the Blackthornes out," observed Ashley.

"Well, they'll do whatever is necessary to help us from the inside," said Jimmy.

"I'm sure they would," said Ashley sardonically. "But they don't know what to do, or when to do it."

"We can tell them," said Jimmy, unperturbed. "Cam will have told them about our escape plan by now, and they'll know, from the talk around, that we made it. She's to tell Chris to watch the east of town for smoke signals every time they come out of the mess hall after a meal. We know what time the noon and afternoon meals are, so we'll know when to send."

"Smoke signals!" Brand stared at Jimmy. "Say, that's a clever idea!"

"We've used them a lot in boy scout work," said Jimmy happily. "You see, I told you woods and nature lore is what you need to survive in conditions like these."

"But the east side of town!" exclaimed Ashley. "Why the devil did you tell him to watch the east, Jimmy? We're way around on the west side."

"How did I know we'd come around this way?" demanded Jimmy defensively. "They're on the east side of town, and it's easier for them to see smoke signals in the east."

"That's true," said Brand. "By the same token, it'll be

easier for us to get to them from the east. We couldn't very well go all the way through town."

"Getting to them's going to be a problem, and getting them out another one," said Ashley. "They can't cross the barbed wire themselves, like we did. And even if we get in, we don't know where to go to find them."

"I do," said Jimmy. "Cam drew me a map of the location of their quarters from that church, with her finger on the back of my hand during the orientation session."

He picked up a short piece of wire and sketched an amazingly detailed map in the dirt, showing the streets of the eastern suburb, the house they had left, the "mess hall" and the church. He sketched in the barbed-wire barricades and located the house in which the Blackthornes were staying.

"There's only one soldier at the entrance to each of those barricades, in the daytime at least," said Ashley thoughtfully. "But they can get reinforcements to them pretty fast if they're attacked."

"Obviously, we couldn't force our way in and back out again, even if we were a lot stronger," said Brand. "We're going to have to work it by stealth, if we can."

"I hope Jimmy's boy scout craft holds up then," said Ashley. "But we're still going to have to have more weapons than this pistol."

"Where are we going to find them?" asked Jimmy.

"Maybe over there," said Ashley, gesturing toward the farmhouse. "I've been watching the place, and there's still no sign of life. We may as well take a chance and go on over."

They made their way cautiously across the field, without a challenge. They climbed over a stile, crossed the yard and went up to the back of the house. The kitchen door stood ajar.

Carefully, they entered, and carefully they peered into each room. No one was there—no one alive, that is. In the bedroom lay a man on the floor, and a woman on a bed. Their clothing had been torn nearly off, and it looked like both had been killed with an ax.

"The sergeant was right," said Brand, repressing a shudder. "Some of these people coming through here must have gone wild."

"There are probably still some wandering around," said Ashley. "There'd be fewer here than farther inland, because

this area was hit by the wave and most of those alive here would have had to come back in afterward."

"Well, we can't help them now," said Brand. "Let's go back to the kitchen and see if any canned food was left by the looters."

They filed back into the kitchen and stopped just inside the door.

Leaning against the jamb of the outer kitchen door, were two rough-looking, ragged men, dirty-faced, with several days' growth of beard. Both carried shotguns, held carelessly in the crooks of their arms. The barrels were pointed toward the trio.

The one on the right side of the door smiled, licking his lips.

"We seen you from the barn," he said, and then laughed out loud. "We figured anybody'd just come on into the house. We was watching you from the barn."

Brand made a gesture.

"We were just looking for food," he said. "We didn't know anyone was already here. If you'll just let us go on our way—"

The shutgun came up suddenly, pointed past Brand.

"You try to point that there pistol, fellow, and I'll blow your belly out," he warned harshly.

Brand heard Ashley's pistol clatter to the floor.

The man smiled again, happily.

"I don't reckon you folks had better go anywhere just yet," he said. "I reckon you'd better come on out to the barn and meet the Duke. He'll say what you can do."

15 • • •

THEIR CAPTORS were ensconced in the hall of the barn, from which the back of the farmhouse was clearly visible. When the three men were taken into the barn, Brand counted ten men standing around or sitting on bales of hay and other objects. All but one of them were variations

on the pattern of the two who had captured them in the kitchen.

The tenth, by his appearance and air, obviously was "the Duke." He sat on the bumper of an automobile parked in the barn as though it were a throne. He was bundled in an enormous fur coat, resurrected from what attic no man could say, and wore a soldier's steel helmet on his head. A crude spread-eagle was painted in red on the front of the helmet.

The Duke was unshaven, like the rest, but to him the rough beard imparted a certain dignity.

"Welcome," said the Duke gravely, when the three had been pushed roughly into some semblance of a line before him. "You fellows are better dressed than most. City folks?"

"The army gave us new clothes in Reston," blurted Jimmy.

"We're from New Argos," said Brand with dignity.

"That's too bad," said the Duke regretfully. "The city folks we've picked up before didn't want to join us. There's not but one thing we can do with people who won't join us."

"What do you mean, join you?" asked Brand.

The Duke waved a fur-clothed arm at the retinue sitting and standing around. All were armed with shotguns or rifles.

"I got a hundred more like this, back at Cistern Springs," he said proudly. "That's doing pretty good for three days. I'm the Duke of Reston, and this country around here's my duchy."

"By what right?" demanded Ashley, who had been looking the Duke over scornfully. The Duke fixed mellow brown eyes on him.

"City folks don't understand a situation where there's no policemen and government to take care of them," he said mournfully. "You folks now, you get flooded out of your city, and you come running over in here, expecting somebody to feed you and take care of you. You get mad when they don't, and you've made an awful mess of the way these people live."

The Duke dug into a capacious pocket of the fur coat and came out with a beautifully carved and aged meerschaum pipe, undoubtedly stolen from some looted home. From the other pocket, he dug out a fistful of loose tobacco

and filled the pipe. One of the other men was at his side at once, to light the pipe with a wooden match.

"Thankee, Herb," said the Duke. "Now, you folks have messed up civilization back here, just because it was messed up for you where you came from. If you know anything about history, you know that when civilization gets all messed up, there's nothing left but a state of barbarism. The only kind of law and order that works in a state of barbarism is a feudal order, and I'm—we're getting a head start, before everything is too far gone."

He gestured with the pipe toward the farmhouse.

"There's no sense in the kind of killing that was done in there," he said. "I'm not going to have people running through here, killing folks for no reason, destroying good property. That's why you fellows have the same choice as everybody else we've run across, the same choice these men here had: join us or get put six feet under."

"You have a shallow knowledge of history," said Ashley, still scornful. "Besides, the army seems to have a different idea about the way to combat barbarism."

"Locking people up like animals!" said the Duke scornfully. "They can't handle the situation. Maybe you don't realize how many million refugees are wandering all over the country, messing up civilization. When it breaks down and the army's gone, I'll have my duchy already off to a good start."

"And if it turns out that the army *can* handle it?" suggested Brand.

"Well," said the Duke with a grin, "if we have to scatter, they'll find the old Duke running a country store or a hog farm up in the hills—and he's been there all the time."

"Having disposed of the original owners," added Brand drily.

"You're pretty sharp, fellow," said the Duke, still grinning. "You're a lot sharper than any of these men here. If you join us, I wouldn't be surprised to see you an earl sometime, or maybe even a count."

"That would be pretty good for a city fellow," said Brand, even more drily. "How could you stand for something like that to happen?"

The Duke winked at him slowly.

"It wouldn't be too hard," he answered. "I'm from New Argos myself!"

This seemed to outrage Ashley.

"Then how have you talked these men into letting *you* be their leader?" he demanded.

"Well, part of it is that most of my men never lived around here either," replied the Duke. "The other part is this."

He arose from the bumper, leaned down and took hold of it with one hand. He straightened, lifting the entire front end of the automobile from the ground without apparent effort.

Slowly, he let the car back to the ground, turned back to Ashley and said, "In a feudal society, strength rules."

Ashley's eyes gleamed behind his spectacles. "Then a stronger man could displace you!" he exclaimed.

"That's right. But there are rules for it. No sneak killing. That'll get a man shot, right quick. It's straight out strength, without weapons, and if you're thinking about trying it, we don't have a hospital."

He sat down on the bumper again, and the car sank with his weight.

"Now, do you join us, or do we whip up a quick firing squad?"

"I'll join you!" answered Ashley, almost eagerly. He looked at the others. Jimmy nodded, quickly, fearfully. After a moment, reluctantly, Brand followed suit. He could see no alternative at the moment.

The group in the barn sprang to action at once. The Duke arose and entered the back seat of the automobile. One of the other men got in as driver. Guided by the others, Brand, Ashley and Jimmy went around behind the car and discovered that a four-wheeled trailer was hitched to it. All of them climbed into the trailer, the driver started the engine, and the car moved out of the barn and through the farmyard.

They turned westward and went down the bumpy road at a moderate pace, the men seated around the sides of the trailer in the light rain gripping their weapons. All but the three newcomers had raincoats; Brand, Ashley and Jimmy huddled together under a wet tarpaulin the others had tossed them. Through the back window of the car, Brand could see the Duke, reared back comfortably in his fur coat, puffiing his meerschaum pipe.

A feudal entourage, indeed.

They drove about two miles to reach Cistern Springs, which had been a small crossroads village. It contained a

single general store, a service station and a dozen houses, each with a barn. It was unusually compact for such a small community.

The car stopped at the general store, where a score of armed men were lounging. The Duke got out and, with a royal gesture, disappeared inside. The others then unloaded from the trailer.

Brand, Ashley and Jimmy were given over to the care of the man named Herb, a snaggle-toothed, good-natured individual with red hair. He led them down the road and up a footpath to one of the barns. Other men lounged around the barn.

Herb told them they had the choice of making beds of hay in one of the stables or sleeping in the loft where the other men—eight of them—preferred to sleep. They were not to go to the house except with the others for meals, or by agreement with the others; that was where the women were.

Upon questioning, Herb explained that there were seventeen women in Cistern Springs now. A few of them had lived there before, the rest had been captured as the gang scoured the countryside, looting. Three of them lived in separate houses with their husbands, but the others were not so fortunate as to have husbands here. Three of them kept house for the Duke, and the others were assigned to the other houses.

The men—except the Duke and the husbands—lived in the barns, and the men in each barn were responsible for the woman or women in that house.

Brand and his companions chose to sleep in a stable, which was dry and reasonably clean. From the loft, they brought down hay and spread it for their beds.

"This is ideal!" said Ashley fiercely, in a low voice, as they arranged the hay. "It couldn't be better!"

"I don't follow you," said Brand. "We're as much prisoners here as we were when the army had us."

"Oh, no!" said Ashley. "We've joined. We have the same rights and privileges as any other members of this gang."

"Gang is right. Despite the Duke's talk of 'feudal order,' this is nothing but a gang of outlaws. The only difference is that their killing and looting is led and organized."

"That makes all the difference," said Ashley, his eyes flashing. "The Duke is more right than you think, Brand.

This is the sort of thing I've been talking about—the only way to meet a situation when civilization has broken down. With an outfit of armed men like this, who have learned to follow a strong leader, we can drive straight across country to the mountains without having to worry about fighting off stray marauders."

"If the Duke should so choose," reminded Brand. "I gather that he has other plans."

"The Duke's plans are the least of my worries," retorted Ashley carelessly.

What Ashley meant became evident that afternoon.

At noon, they went into the house with the other men from the barn, and sat around a big dining room table. A sullen, dejected woman in her early thirties served them a good meal. From one of the other rooms sounded the wail of a young baby as they ate.

After lunch, Herb took them down to the general store to get weapons. When they entered, the Duke was sitting in a big rocking chair, still in his fur coat and helmet, his feet propped on a box, drinking a can of beer. He nodded at them and elicited their first names from them.

Herb took them into the back room, where from a big stack they were permitted to select three new shotguns, and from a box they filled their pockets with shells.

When they returned to the main part of the store, carrying their guns, Ashley went straight up to the Duke.

"We're full-fledged members of the community now, with all the rights of members?" he asked.

"Subjects of the duchy," corrected the Duke. "With all the rights of subjects, provided you obey the rules."

"That includes the right to challenge the Duke for the position of leadership?" pursued Ashley daringly.

The Duke set down his beer, and measured Ashley's well-built but slender figure from head to toe. He grinned.

"Sure," he said in a soft voice. "But I told you, we don't have a hospital."

"You should have thought of that before," said Ashley confidently. "When and where?"

"Why, right now," said the Duke, getting up slowly. "Out here in the street, where everybody can enjoy it."

He moved out through the door, like a giant bear, the others following. The men-at-arms outside looked up, shifted their feet and nodded their heads at his appearance.

The rain was a light drizzle, the graveled area in front of the store wet but well packed.

"Ring the bell, Herb," said the Duke.

On a post in front of the store was a big bell, which had perhaps been a fire bell. Herb seized the rope, and the clangor sounded out over the community.

From all the barns the men came running, carrying their guns. There may have been only a hundred of them, but they looked like many more when they had crowded together in the street in front of the general store.

"Men," said the Duke in a great voice, "I have a challenger!"

They knew what that meant. A great shout went up. Laughter and cheers spread through the group.

"Some of you have been through this with me, and all of you know the rules," said the Duke. "We have to abide by them if there's going to be order in the duchy, and if I lose I'll stand by the winner to see that they're enforced. If I win . . ."

He stopped and turned to Ashley.

"You told me your names, but I've forgotten which is which," he said apologetically.

"Call me Ash," said Ashley coolly.

"If I win," shouted the Duke, turning back to the crowd, "Ash will be one of our men and won't suffer any punishment for his challenge—except what I give him at the time."

A ripple of laughter ran through the crowd. Brand noticed one man waving a bandaged arm on high, and suspected its cause.

"If I lose—" The Duke was drowned out by a roar from the men.

The men jostled back to form a big semicircle. The Duke stepped off the store's board porch onto the ground and peeled off his fur coat. He tossed it and his helmet to one of the spectators and turned to face the store.

He was a massive man, bull-necked, yet apparently light on his feet. Looking at his huge arms, Brand thought they must be as big as Ashley's thighs. Despite his dislike of Ashley's arrogance, Brand felt a little sorry for Ashley.

"No weapons, or the men will kill you," said the Duke to Ashley loudly. "Take off what you want to take off, and come out fighting."

With a shrug, Ashley took off his coat and removed his spectacles and handed them to Jimmy. He loosened his belt, slipped out of his shoes and, in shirt, trousers and socks, advanced into the street, lithely, in the half-crouched pose of the boxer.

The Duke waited for him, and his great shoulders seemed to hunch. He doubled his fists and raised them, his feet apart. Again, Brand felt a little sorry for Ashley. The Duke was apparently not to be lured by his own strength into playing a wrestler's game against a boxer, and one of his fists looked as though it could crush Ashley's skull.

Ashley came close to the Duke and feinted with both fists in a quick one-two. The Duke's right arm was up, and would have warded off the blows had they struck. The Duke jabbed low at Ashley with his left, and, like a pile driver, his right fist streaked for Ashley's head.

Ashley's movement was so fast it was almost a blur. He ducked under the swinging fist, thrust up the Duke's left forearm with both hands and brought his knee up hard into the Duke's groin.

With a grunt of surprise, the Duke bent forward. But his arms went up to protect his head.

Straightening like the crack of a whip, Ashley slid around the Duke's side and brought the edge of his hand down in a sharp chopping stroke behind the Duke's ear.

He leaped back, crouching, hands held ready to strike again, but the deed was done. The Duke toppled forward onto the road, jerked once and lay still.

A great gasp went up from the crowd of men.

Ashley straightened.

"Have I won?" he asked them, shouting.

There was silence.

He turned, facing first to the left, then to the right. The men stared at him from the crowd.

"Have I won?" he asked again.

"You've won," said Herb from the porch at Brand's side. Then a murmur of assent went up from the crowd.

"All right, then," said Ashley crisply. "I'm the new Duke of Reston. Herb, throw a bucket of water on the ex-duke, and tell him to come in for a conference with me."

Without looking to right or left, Ashley strode to the porch. He took his spectacles and coat from Jimmy and put them back on. Then he walked into the store, sat down

in the rocking chair, extracted a cigarette from his case and lighted it with hands that trembled a little now.

Brand and Jimmy had followed him in. Ashley looked at them, but said nothing. After a moment, he took his cigarette from his lips and smiled wanly.

In a moment, Herb entered, followed by the man who had been the Duke. The big man's head and shoulders were soaked, and he looked dazed. He carried the fur coat over one arm, the helmet in his other hand.

He came up and stood before Ashley and grinned wryly. He shook his head slightly. Ashley looked him over coldly.

"What's your name?" Ashley asked.

"The—no, that's not right any more, is it? I'm Bill Dolphin, Duke Ash."

"All right, Bill, I'll need your help. Have you passed out any other titles in the duchy?"

"No, not yet. We've just been organizing here three days, you know," answered Bill. "I figured later, when the army's gone, we could spread out and take over some of these abandoned farms and establish a real duchy."

"From now on, you're the Baron of Cistern Springs, and my second-in-command," said Ashley. "You're too good an organizer to be in the ranks."

"Thankee, Duke," said Bill, straightening, a broad smile spreading over his face. He held out the coat and helmet. "These are yours now."

"Keep them," said Ash. "If I need any trade-marks, I'll develop my own. Now tell me, hasn't the army ever come across this place?"

"They cruise the countryside, looking for refugees, and there've been a copter and a couple of armored cars through here," answered Bill. "But I've got a scout out on every road, and we got the women out and took to the woods in time."

"You could have taken a couple of armored cars if you'd handled it right," said Ashley sharply.

"Sure, and bring the whole outfit down on us," retorted Bill. "We can't fight the army."

"We can, and will," replied Ashley. "After supper, Baron, you and I are going to get together and determine how we stand in the way of men, material and organization."

"Just what in the devil are you thinking about doing, Ash?" demanded Brand at this point.

Ashley looked around at him, a little surprised, as though he had forgotten Brand and Jimmy were there.

"Well, I'll tell you," he answered slowly. "There are food, weapons and women for all the men in that town, and one woman I'm particularly interested in. We're going to take Reston from the army!"

16 • • •

"JIMMY, WE'VE GOT TO GET OUT of here!" said Brand desperately, in a half-whisper.

The two men were in the stable where they had chosen to sleep. It was lighted dimly by a flickering lantern on a nail.

Ashley had refused to eject Bill from the house he had occupied as the Duke, letting him remain in token of his new status as the Baron and himself taking one of the smaller houses. He had invited Brand and Jimmy to share his house with him. Jimmy seemed willing, but went along with Brand when Brand refused.

It seemed to Brand that acceptance of the invitation would have amounted to tacit acceptance of Ashley's philosophy, as expressed in taking over "the duchy of Reston," and of this Brand fiercely disapproved.

"It seems that we're always trying to escape from something," said Jimmy glumly. "First it was the tidal wave, and then it was the rising water, then it was the army. Now it's Ash. Ash got us out of the other situations all right, and I'm beginning to wonder if he's not right about this."

"I thought you were convinced that the woodsman's way is the only way to survive now," said Brand sardonically.

"It still seems right," said Jimmy, "but I didn't figure on all this violence, people wandering around and killing . . ."

His voice trailed off.

"In the first place," said Brand, "Ashley didn't get us out of the other situations. You and Chris led us to

Noah's Knob, and the army rescued us at the river. It's true the escape from the army was Ash's idea, but it got us into this, and the Blackthornes are still being held in town.

"In the second place, attacking the army with this gang of ruffians is a crazy idea that probably will get us all killed. Even if he should succeed, the Blackthornes are just as apt to be killed by this gang of outlaws as rescued."

"I suppose you're right," said Jimmy, his nose twitching morosely. "But if we try to leave, they'll shoot us."

"Not at all," replied Brand. "I don't know whether Ash thinks we're not with him, or just doesn't care whether we leave or not. I expect it's the latter. At any rate, we're not under guard, and the only lookouts are on the roads."

A slight tremor shook the earth beneath them. The lantern swayed on its nail, and hay drifted down through the cracks in the loft floor above them. From above sounded sleepy, questioning voices.

The tremor was brief and mild.

"That's another thing," said Brand. "We may not have much time to get the Blackthornes out and get to the mountains. The land is still sinking."

"All right," agreed Jimmy resignedly. "I'll go with you."

"Let's go then," said Brand, getting up. "Right now."

Leaving the lantern burning, they took their guns and went quietly out through the hall of the barn. They saw no one. They walked out into the rain and, Brand ahead, skirted the darkened house and climbed the fence into a field.

No one challenged them. When they felt sure of being past Cistern Springs' outposts, they got on the road and headed eastward.

The road turned back and forth considerably, and they were faced with several choices at forks and crossroads. But by midnight they sighted the lights of Reston, and a short time later they answered the challenge of a uniformed sentry on its outskirts by coming forward into the light, their hands raised above their heads, their guns dropped to the ground behind them.

The sentry called for the corporal of the guard, who took them to the officer of the day. He turned out to be the same second lieutenant who had conducted their orientation session the previous day. He did not recognize them, but when they gave their names as he sleepily checked

them in on written forms, he came awake. He went to a file, checked it and came back, tapping his pencil against his teeth thoughtfully.

"Caravel and Haggard," he said severely, staring at them. "Two of the men who ran away. Where's the other one?"

"He didn't come back with us," said Brand. "He's taken over an outlaw gang several miles west of here, and is planning to attack the town. That's why we came back: to warn you."

This seemed to make no impression on the lieutenant.

"You're lucky that soldier who was shot didn't die," he said. "You may be court-martialed anyhow. That'll be up to the captain to decide."

"I need to talk to your captain," said Brand, "if you're not going to pay any attention to what I said about the gang's plan to attack."

"Don't worry, you'll see him tomorrow," said the officer, without interest. "For tonight, you'll go to the guardhouse."

"The guardhouse," they found out, was the town's small and not very clean jail. It had only two cells, in each of which several other prisoners were already asleep.

"Brand," said Jimmy in a low voice as they crawled into their bunks in the semi-darkness, "we didn't have any trouble getting away from Cistern Springs. What keeps those other men from escaping, too?"

"Why should they want to?" countered Brand. "Where would they go? They're better off there than they would be wandering around alone, and they know it."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Jimmy and fell silent.

They remained in jail all the next day, amid some riff-raff that made the Duke's gang seem like clean-cut gentlemen by contrast. Late in the afternoon they were given an opportunity to bathe and shave, and were given clean clothes, and early in the evening a corporal appeared to take them before the captain.

The corporal was young and open-faced. He appeared to be no more than nineteen, and he wore the .45-caliber pistol at his side with obvious relish. As he escorted them down the street to headquarters, which was just around the corner in what had been the town's offices, he volunteered the information that his name was Arnold Jenkins and he was from Philadelphia.

Captain Foster, on the other hand, was chubby and bespectacled, dark-eyed and short-haired. In contrast to the

lieutenant of the previous night, he listened attentively as Brand described the organization of "the duchy of Reston" and told of Ashley's plan to attack the town.

"Your spirit of cooperation is commendable," he said in a soft voice when Brand had finished. "It was courageous of you men to come back and warn us. But I don't think there's any reason for worry. We've withstood some assaults from renegades here already."

"Individuals and small, disorganized groups, maybe," said Brand, aware that formation of a gang like the Duke's in so short a time would be so unusual as not to be considered a possibility. "But I don't think you realize how efficiently this man Bill Dolphin organized those men to followed a leader, or him shrewd Ashley is likely to be in utilizing that organization."

"The army has been organized for fighting much longer than three days," answered Captain Foster. "We can defend the town. You men have done your duty, and I think the fact that you returned to give this information is adequate evidence of your conscientiousness."

The captain seemed so pleased with their action—after the lieutenant had indicated the possibility of a court-martial—that Brand was emboldened to ask a favor.

"Captain, don't you let civilians here visit each other?" he asked. "See their friends, I mean, in different sections of town?"

"Currently, the only provision we have made for such a thing is that internees are granted considerable freedom in their own sectors during the daylight hours," replied Captain Foster. "That may seem unduly restrictive to a civilian, but it's necessary, because more than three-fourths of the civilians interned in Reston now are refugees who were without homes, food or means of transportation when we took them in our charge. If we didn't segregate unattached men from women, and both from family groups, I'm afraid the situation might get out of hand rather quickly."

"I can see how that's necessary," said Brand. "But Jimmy and I here traveled all the way from New Argos with a family of close friends, the Blackthornes. I wonder if we couldn't be quartered near them, so we could have some contact with them?"

Captain Foster shook his head.

"They would be in the family sector," he said. "We can't permit unattached males to quarter in the family sector."

He glanced at the electric clock on his desk.

"However," he added, "it's still an hour before lights-out. Since you're to be assigned to quarters in M Sector instead of being returned to the guardhouse, I think you can be permitted a brief visit with this family, under escort, on your way to your quarters."

The captain called in Corporal Arnold Jenkins and gave him instructions. A few moments later, the three of them bounced awkwardly off to the first sector, Sector F, in one of the army's tall, ungainly reconnaissance cars.

The Blackthornes were established in a small house on a nice residential street. When Chris opened the door to Corporal Jenkins' knock, it struck Brand that they were living almost as naturally as at home. Camilla and her mother were on the sofa, busy altering some of the skimpy extra clothing the army had issued them. Craig was seated by a table, muttering under his breath as he tried vainly to get a news broad cast on a small radio, through crackling static.

"Oh, it's good to see you!" exclaimed Camilla, jumping up and running to greet them when Brand and Jimmy entered. The corporal followed them in, shyly. "We didn't know what had happened to you!"

Camilla threw her arms around both of them and kissed both on the cheek. Craig got up with a smile and came forward, hand outstretched, Harriet behind him.

"Well, we escaped night before last, as Jimmy told you we planned to do," said Brand. "We got away all right, but Jimmy and I came back."

Camilla peered between them, and an expression of alarm spread over her face. Evidently she had just realized that the third man in the group was not Ashley, but a soldier.

"Where's Ash?" she asked in a tense voice. "Has—has anything happened to him?"

Brand felt an unreasonable twinge of jealousy at her concern.

"He's all right," he assured her. "Or he was when we left him. But—well, it's a peculiar story."

"Sit down and tell us about it," invited Harriet. "I'd offer you some refreshment, but your officers, young man—" she looked at Jenkins—"won't let us keep food in the house."

The corporal was accepted into the group courteously, though with some slight reserve. He listened with as much

interest and wonder as the Blackthornes, as Brand told what had happened to them, with some contributions from Jimmy.

"We saw some pretty bad things when we moved in and took over," said Jenkins when they had finished. "The refugees swarmed over this country like locusts. There wasn't enough food for everybody, and those who had cars couldn't get gas. They were killing people for a candy bar or a ham sandwich, breaking into stores and burning down houses.

"That's why they came back into this section after the wave receded. There just isn't enough to feed everybody anywhere in the countryside, and some of them came back figuring there'd still be loot left here, where the wave had hit. But we didn't know they'd organized."

"They're more of a mob than anything else, but they have leadership and guns," said Brand. "But Ash seems to think he can control them and has a better chance of escaping the water by throwing in with them. The army has been so stupid in ignoring my attempt to warn them that the water's going to come up a lot higher that I'd agree with him if he hadn't gotten that wild idea about attacking the town."

"But why won't they believe you, Brand?" asked Craig. "Didn't you tell them you were a scientist with Project People? Surely that should indicate to them that you know what you're talking about."

"Captain Foster seems to have a little more sense than that G-2 lieutenant," replied Brand. "While we were talking tonight, he told me he had read my report and had forwarded it to higher headquarters, marked 'urgent.' But the army has to wait for orders, and by the time that can go through channels and get action—if it does—we'll all be drowned."

The house rattled slightly, then subsided.

"See what I mean?" asked Brand. "The land's still sinking."

From the distance, toward the main part of town, sounded the dull thud of an explosion. The group froze, startled, listening.

There was a rattle of distant gunfire. It ceased, then started again.

"I'd better find out what's going on," said Jenkins, getting hastily to his feet. "Where's the phone?"

"In the hall," answered Harriet, gesturing.

As the corporal strode into the hall, a siren began to wail in the heart of town. Its weird shriek rose and fell, and all the while the gunfire grew heavier. To it now was added the ripping sound of submachine guns, the thump-thump of an automatic rifle, and then the short cough of mortars.

"Ashley!" murmured Brand positively. "All that shooting couldn't mean anything but a major raid."

Jenkins came back from the hall, a worried look on his face.

"They caught us by surprise, in spite of your telling the captain about it," he said. "They had some dynamite, and sneaked up and blew up the outpost on the main road coming in from the west. My sergeant tells me they spread out over several blocks in toward town before the guard squads at headquarters and the armory could get over there and stop them."

"Does it look like they'll take over the town?" asked Craig anxiously.

"I don't know, but I doubt it," replied Jenkins. "That siren would have brought everybody out, and this outfit moves fast under fire. Sergeant Grissom said they've gotten one armored car up to reinforce the guard units, and he thinks they can contain the enemy in the present perimeter around the break-in point until we can move units in for mop-up"

Jenkins looked at Brand and Jimmy.

"I hate to break up your visit," he said apologetically. "but I'll have to take you to your quarters. I can't leave you here, and they'll need me at headquarters."

He went to the door and picked up his military raincoat, which he had taken off and dropped to the floor when they came in. Slipping into it, he moved across the room to look out a window toward the center of town.

"There's something burning up there," he said. "Maybe two or three buildings."

Suddenly, like a tiger, Brand leaped a quarter of the way across the room and threw his arms around Jenkins from behind, pinning the corporal's arms to his side.

"Get his pistol, Jimmy!" he shouted, as Jenkins grunted and squirmed, almost shaking himself free.

Jimmy obeyed with alacrity. Jenkins subsided sullenly when Jimmy held the pistol pointed at him.

"Cam, you and your mother go into the kitchen for a few minutes," Brand instructed. When they left, he ordered Jenkins, "Take off your uniform, corporal. We're changing clothes."

Jenkins began to obey, but he said, "I don't know what your idea is, fellow, but you'll probably get shot for this little trick. We're not playing games around here, you know."

"I hate to do this, corporal," said Brand, removing his own clothing while Jimmy held the pistol. Craig and Chris hovered silently on the other side of the room. "You seem like a decent fellow, and we don't propose to hurt you. But Ash has already done better than I thought he could, and he just might take the town. I think he'd protect this family himself, but with that mob of outlaws running wild, he may not be the first to get here."

"What are you planning to do, Brand?" asked Jimmy.

"We're going to take over that recon car and try to get out of town on the east," replied Brand.

"Do you think that, just because we're meeting an attack from the west, we've pulled all guards off the eastern road?" demanded Jenkins angrily.

"With the rain curtains up on the recon car, and me in uniform, I've got a pretty fair chance of getting through," replied Brand.

When he and the corporal had exchanged clothing, Brand called in the women.

"Cam, you take the pistol from Jimmy and hold it on the corporal while I tie him up," instructed Brand. "Jimmy, you and Mr. Blackthorne and Chris had better take all the blankets and clothes in the house out to the recon car. If we get out, we may need all we can get, traveling west."

Camilla took the pistol and held it steadily on the soldier, while Brand, with a kitchen knife, cut the cords from two Venetian blinds. Jimmy, Craig and Chris went to the bedrooms and returned with their arms full. They headed for the front door.

As they approached it, it was thrown open suddenly.

Ashley strolled into the living room with arrogant stride. Behind him came three of the men-at-arms of "the duchy of Reston," shotguns in the crooks of their arms.

"Well, good evening," said Ashley amiably. "I see my two AWOL subjects came back, after all."

"Ash!" exclaimed Camilla, turning in her chair. Her face was pale with shock.

"Hello, Cam," said Ashley calmly. "I've come back to make you the Duchess of Reston."

17 • • •

ASHLEY LOOKED THE PART of the feudal ruler he fancied himself to be. He strode into the middle of the room with proud step, and a lithe self-control that reminded Brand of that feral advance which had preceded Bill Dolphin's downfall. Ashley wore the same clothing he had when they escaped from Reston, but now it was covered with a raincoat. He wore a wet slouch hat, and a rifle was slung over his shoulder.

"How did you get here so fast?" asked Brand. "Has your gang taken over the town already?"

"Simple diversionary tactics," replied Ashley. "What I'm interested in is here. I don't care about the rest of the town except as a source for replenishing supplies. While the Baron led the main attack, I moved in with a few men at the eastern side of town, depending on quiet and surprise, with the limited objective of knocking out the sentries and getting through the check-points to this house."

"You don't think we're so disorganized that you can get away with that, do you?" demanded Jenkins scornfully. "They've probably covered that gate in strength by now, expecting an attack from that sector."

Ashley looked at him in surprise. Then he looked at Camilla, sitting in the chair holding the pistol pointed at Jenkins, and at Brand, standing in military uniform with the Venetian blind cords still in his hands. For the first time he seemed to realize the situation which he had interrupted, and that Jenkins was no interned civilian visiting the Blackthornes, but a solider robbed of his uniform and gun.

Ashley smiled.

"That's why we're going back out over the wire, like we did the other night," he answered. "The platform out there in the trailer is big enough to get my car over your barbed wire."

"Ash, you've done it!" exclaimed Camilla. "I'm proud of you!"

Everyone looked at her in astonishment. Her eyes shone with excitement, and her face was flushed.

"Are you really, Cam?" asked Ashley, the surprise on his face giving way to pleasure. "I thought you disagreed with me, like all the others."

"You had to prove yourself, Ash," said Camilla, in a seductive tone that Brand had never heard from her before. "Don't you know a woman likes a strong man who knows how to use his strength? Come here, darling!"

Keeping the pistol pointed at Jenkins, she twisted herself in the chair and held out her other arm invitingly to Ashley. Her face was alight and irresistable.

Ashley strode eagerly to her side, and leaned over her. She put her arm around his neck, lifted her face to his, and, with Ashley's body shielding her from the sight of the three grinning ruffians at the door, she turned the pistol and thrust its muzzle into Ashley's stomach.

Brand was near enough to hear her whisper, "Keep quiet and do as I say, or I'll pull the trigger, Ash! So help me, I will! Now, turn your head over your shoulder and tell those men to get out of here!"

His face deathly pale, Ashley twisted his head, with an agonized expression on his face.

"Men," he said, almost choking, "go outside and wait for me on the porch."

The three men looked at Ashley and at each other, puzzled, but obeyed without protest. They turned and filed out slowly, looking back over their shoulders. Jimmy and Craig, who could not see from where they were standing that Camilla had the pistol pointed at Ashley, looked equally puzzled. Harriet and Chris, near the kitchen door, could see what was going on, but Mrs. Blackthorne kept a tight warning grip on her son's shoulder.

As soon as the door closed behind the men, Camilla thrust Ashley away from her, sprang from her chair and handed the pistol to Brand.

"You idiot!" she exclaimed angrily to Ashley. "We're all

in danger of drowning, and you can't resist playing Napoleon!"

Ashley was still shaken, but had recovered some of his composure.

"I've come nearer saving you from drowning than anyone else so far," he said sardonically. "You and your family would have a better chance by going with me now than by staying here and depending on the army to save you."

"We're not staying here," said Brand decisively, "but we're not getting mixed up with that gang again either. Ash, I want you to go to the front door, stick your head out and tell those men to unload the platform from your trailer, then take the car and wait for you near the east entrance to town, where you came in. And don't try anything funny, because I'll be right behind you with this gun in your back."

"They know we're not going to try to get out the way we came in," replied Ashley scornfully.

"Tell them to wait for you down the street then," ordered Brand. "Get them well away from this house."

Unhappily, Ashley followed instructions. There was a brief argument with the men, who questioned unloading the platform, which they knew to be a key to their escape from the town. Ashley overrode their objections with admirable arrogance.

"I'm going to take over this army recon car to lead us out of here," he snapped. "I know what I'm doing, and I don't want that car and trailer out here where some passing patrol will get suspicious of it. Now do as I say!"

The three men clumped off the porch, lifted a flat structure of boards as big as a barn door from the trailer and laid it in the front yard, then got in the car which once had been Bill Dolphin's private chariot and drove off slowly down the street.

When they had gone, Brand relieved Ashley of his rifle, and stood looking at him meditatively.

"The latest Duke of Reston has just been deposed," he said. "Ash, we can't tie you up and leave you here. The army would shoot you for what you've done. If we take you with us, will you promise not to cause any more trouble?"

"What choice do I have?" retorted Ashley. "I want to get to the mountains as much as you do."

"Jimmy," said Brand, "you three take the blankets and

clothes on out to the recon car. Take these cords and tie that platform to the back of it, too."

Jimmy, Craig and Chris went out the front door, with their arms full. Brand watched them through the front door as they dumped the blankets and clothing into the recon car, and struggled at lifting the heavy contraption of boards up behind the car and securing it there.

"Corporal, we can't tie you up and leave you here either," said Brand to Jenkins. "We're going to let you go out the back door, so those outlaws won't take it out on you when they find we've gypped them. We'll just have to trust you not to give the alarm until we've had time to get out of town."

Jenkins did not answer. He appeared to be undergoing a struggle within himself.

When Brand saw that the car had been made ready, he slung Ashley's rifle over his own shoulder and said, "Ash, go out ahead of me. I'll have the pistol in my raincoat pocket, and I'll shoot if I have to."

He motioned Camilla and Harriet out. Then, leaving Jenkins standing irresolutely in the living room, he herded Ashley out into the rain.

It had not really stopped raining since the army rescued them at the river and brought them to Reston. It was coming down steadily now, streaking down in shining lances in the light from the street lamps. Water gurgled down the gutters.

The three men who had come with Ashley had gone half a block up the street to the next intersection, and were sitting there in the car, parked at the corner. The rain was coming down so hard and the nearest street light was so placed that it was impossible for them to see in detail what was happening here in the front yard.

Beyond the outlaws' car, flames and smoke lit up the center of town. Intermittent bursts of firing still sounded from that direction, deepened occasionally by the harsh voice of a machine gun. Brand interpreted these sounds to mean that house-to-house fighting was going on as the soldiers attempted to dislodge the outlaws from their beachhead.

The Blackthornes climbed into the back seat of the tall recon car. Brand motioned for Ashley to go around the car and get in the front.

As he followed Ashley around the car, a row of lights

swept up over the horizon beyond the embattled main section of Reston, and the roar of engines drowned out the firing. Like a swarm of lightning bugs, they came up over the town and began to descend.

"Copters!" exclaimed Brand. "They must be reinforcements from Raleigh. That's one reason you couldn't ever take the town from the army, Ash. They'll box your men in up there and kill or capture all of them."

"I never expected to actually capture the town," retorted Ashley sullenly. "I said I did, and the men thought we could. I wanted a diversion, so I could get Cam and her family out of here."

"And risk all of you getting killed by any outlaws who might escape, for betraying them," remarked Brand. "Jimmy, I want you to get in the front seat after Ash, and hold the pistol on him while I drive."

"Brand, I don't want to go!" said Jimmy.

"What?"

"I want to stay here," said Jimmy, his voice quavering. "I don't want to go out there and have to fight men like that. If the army's going to hold out, I want to stay here and take my chances with them."

Brand stared at him. The rain ran down Jimmy's boyish, tragic face—perhaps mixed with tears. Jimmy's nose twitched pathetically.

"All right," said Brand. "You'd better get back in the house and go out the back way with the corporal. Cam, you'll have to get up in the front seat with me and keep the pistol on Ash."

Camilla climbed from the back and followed Ashley into the front seat, taking the pistol from Brand. Brand went around the car, unslung his rifle and got in under the steering wheel as Jimmy disappeared into the house.

The recon car was headed in the opposite direction from the outlaws' car. When Brand started the engine and turned on the lights, the lights of the other car went on, down the street. Evidently the men thought Ashley was still in charge of the departing group and expected them to follow him, as usual.

Brand put the recon car in gear. He had turned the corner at the other end of the block before the outlaws' car could get turned around.

"They shouldn't know the layout of these barricaded sectors, so we ought to lose them without any trouble," said

Brand, swinging down a side street. "Where were you planning to get out of town, Ash?"

"We scouted the countryside during daylight yesterday," replied Ashley. "To get on the only other road east of town—and you have to stay on a road with this car—you have to cross the barbed wire about two blocks south of the house where we were quartered before."

They found the entrances to the other two sectors, and passed through them slowly, without challenge by the sentries. Apparently the guards were there only to keep civilians from moving through sectors, and permitted military vehicles to pass freely.

In the outermost sector, after two false starts, they found the street that merged into a small road running out of town. It was blocked by the barbed wire now, at the edge of the sector.

This fence was patrolled now by more than the pair of sentries with whom they had dealt previously. But a bare two companies of soldiers engaged in a desperate street battle could not afford a major force to guard a perimeter not under attack. A jeep armed with a machine gun, carrying four soldiers, bounced over the sidewalks and crossed the street ahead of them as they eased toward the barricade.

The men in the jeep looked over the recon car as the jeep climbed the other sidewalk, but it went its way down the barbed wire. Evidently the patrol thought the recon car was inspecting the town's defenses.

Brand pulled the car up close to the barbed wire.

"Now, Ash, Mr. Blackthorne," he said, "let's get this platform across the barbed wire. Fast!"

They climbed out, and Brand slashed the cords tying the nailed-together boards to the back of the car. To their left, down the barbed wire, they could see the jeep's tail lights, bouncing and still receding.

Dragging the platform forward, they lifted it on its end and let it fall forward across the wire. The near end remained on the ground. The weight of the boards sagged the wire slightly.

Three blocks away down the wire, the jeep had evidently reached the end of its allotted tour. The headlights swung around in a tight circle and headed back toward them.

They ran for the recon car and leaped in. Brand threw the car into gear and it jumped forward.

The men in the jeep could not have been suspicious. No shots were fired.

The recon car hit the boards, and they crunched down, flattening the wire. The car rolled over them, gathering speed as it hit the road beyond.

Still no shots were fired at them, but the jeep jumped forward toward the spot they had broken over. A searchlight went on, probed the length of barbed wire and swung out over the countryside toward them.

Brand pressed the accelerator to the floor, and the recon car careened away at top speed over the bumpy road. Behind them, the jeep halted at the break in the barbed wire, and its searchlight probed through the rainy night after them, questioningly.

There was little likelihood of any pursuit, until the battle in the midst of town had been settled.

"Take this next turn to the right," said Ashley calmly. "It'll take us to a road that by-passes the town to the south and heads westward."

"Back to Cistern Springs?" suggested Brand sardonically.

Ashley laughed.

"I'm not sure of my welcome at Cistern Springs now," he answered. "No, you'd have to turn off later on to get to Cistern Springs. This road goes on westward, I don't know how far."

18 • • •

THEY WERE ABOUT TWO MILES down the westward road when the earthquake struck. This time it was no warning quiver like the last two brief tremors, but a full-fledged quake like the one that had hit them on the expressway.

They were bumping down the narrow road, along a straight stretch lined with trees on both sides, when the ground seemed to tilt and slide out from under them. The recon car skidded sidewise into a shallow ditch, its right

rear wheel thudding against the bank. Brand leaned forward and cut the ignition.

"Stay in the car!" he warned sharply. "It may turn over, but it'll give us some protection if trees or branches fall on us."

After the first sharp shift, the ground was quiet for a moment. Then it began to bounce and undulate, shaking violently as though it were a dice box in the hands of a giant gambler. The car swayed and twisted. Limbs rattled to the ground around them, and the trees swayed far over and creaked as though in a high wind.

The people in the car were rattled from side to side, hurled against each other, bruised against the metal of the car's sides. Once the car leaned perilously on two wheels, almost overbalancing, then righted itself as the earth's motion reversed itself.

It could not have lasted more than two minutes, but it seemed an eternity. In the stillness that followed, the refugees in the car gasped in relief.

"Well, we're not under water yet," remarked Camilla.

"No," said Brand, "but that quake means the land has settled some more. We're nearer to being under water than we were a few minutes ago."

"How far do you suppose it's settled by now?" asked Ashley.

"There's no way of telling," answered Brand. "We're about three hundred feet above the old sea level in this area, so the land could have dropped a couple of hundred feet since the army picked us up without the water reaching us yet. But if it's dropped that much, the water's right at our heels."

"That quake would convert me, if I hadn't been already," said Ashley. "I'm with you, Brand, for getting on west as fast as we can."

"We'll have to get west of Winston-Salem to be safe, and that's pretty close to two hundred miles," said Brand, starting the car. "And we can't take the expressway, or we'll just get stopped by the army again. We'll have to find some road maps somewhere and stick to the smaller roads."

"Why not just keep following every road that leads west?" suggested Chris.

"There's no way of telling which way is west, even in the daytime, with the sky overcast as it is," replied Brand.

"I can," said Chris, "from the moss on the tree trunks."

"Look, son, we don't have time to keep jumping out of the car looking at tree trunks. We've got to cover some distance in the next few days."

The recon car bumped along through the rain. The quake had shattered and broken the surface of road and fields alike, but the high-wheeled car was built for rough terrain and was able to progress slowly but steadily. A little distance down the road, a wooden bridge had been shattered, but the creek it crossed was shallow, and the army car forded it and ground back up the bank to the road.

They came to a crossroad. The headlights of the recon car picked out a sign, pointing to the right and reading: *Cistern Springs, ¼ Mile.*" Ashley had told the truth.

Brand drove straight ahead.

The road was almost impassable. The earthquake had twisted and roiled it, and left great gaps and humps in its surface. Nothing except a military vehicle, with four-wheel drive and an extra low gear, could have negotiated it.

At last they came to a state highway that moved in a westerly direction, and on it they soon found a gasoline station. Here they found road maps. There was no gasoline in the tanks, but the army kept its vehicles fueled and they could drive for a long time yet on the gasoline in the recon car.

Though the pavement on this highway was heavier and wider, it was not much easier traveling after the quake. And they felt compelled to leave it and circle the first town they reached; there they might run into either the army or looters.

Gray, rainy dawn had broken and visibility was somewhat better when Brand turned off the road and headed toward a barn that sat alone in a field.

"We're going to have to get some sleep sometime," he said. "And we'll be safer traveling at night and sleeping in the daytime. Cam, you and your father and I will have to take turns guarding Ash with the pistol."

"You don't have to watch me and treat me like a criminal," said Ashley indignantly. "I'm as anxious to get to the mountains as you are. I was willing to join the Duke and his men just as a means to that end, and it's obvious I have no reason to go back there now."

"After what's happened, I'm not going to trust you any more than I have to," retorted Brand.

A careful check of the barn proved it empty. They

spread hay inside the hall, and Brand took the first two-hour watch while the others slept. By the time he awoke Craig and stretched out himself, it was full daylight and the rain had slackened.

Brand was awakened by the sound of a shot, loud in his ears. He came to his feet, half awake, grabbing the rifle he had taken from Ashley.

Craig stood at the door, looking out, the pistol in his hand. The others, Ashley included, were sitting up on their hay pallets, just awakened. Brand hurried to Craig's side.

Two men were standing down the slope. One carried a club, the other a long knife. They had evidently been approaching the barn when stopped by Craig's warning shot.

"What're you so stingy for?" demanded the one with the knife. "All we want is to get in out of the rain, and maybe find something to eat. "

"Find it somewhere else," said Brand sharply, and raised the rifle.

The men cursed him, but turned and shuffled away.

"Do you suppose they'll bring back others?" asked Craig anxiously. "Should we move on?"

"I doubt it," said Brand. "If they met any others, they'd probably fight with each other. And we do need sleep. But we're going to have to find some food somewhere, too."

This was not a simple task, they found when they left the barn in midafternoon and continued westward. They were now entering territory which had not been hit by the tidal wave, and the refugees here had not been driven out or drowned.

They had stripped the countryside like locusts. Those who had not been taken into custody by the army and interned in the larger towns—and there seemed to be hundreds of them—were still wandering along the roads and through the fields, wet and hungry, looting anything that might be left, fighting each other for a scrap of food or clothing. Their descent upon this area had made the people who had lived here refugees themselves, forced to go father west or turn to the army for protection.

Except for the wandering refugees, the countryside outside the army-held towns was uninhabited now. They passed more corpses beside the road now—many more—than they had seen on the flood-devastated coastal plain earlier. The difference was that most of these corpses had died by the

hand of man, and they were naked—their slayers had taken their clothing.

Twice they passed army vehicles, once an armored car, the other time two truckloads of soldiers bearing rifles. They were not stopped. Whether the combined disaster of attack and earthquake at Reston had prevented the spread of an alarm for Jenkins' stolen uniform and vehicle, they did not know; but apparently these soldiers assumed a man in uniform, driving a recon car, was one of their own number rescuing refugees.

They themselves were constantly in danger from refugees. Most of the ragged people they met or came up to along the road scattered into the fields at the approach of the olive drab car; for whatever reasons of their own, they apparently wanted to avoid being picked up by the army. But some stood their ground and tried to block the car, brandishing stones and clubs. Only the threat of guns thrust through the car's side curtains forced their passage in these instances.

Now, during the daylight hours, they could see clearly that they were driving through a flooded countryside.

Driving at night, they had skidded through mud and splashed through puddles, sometimes traversing washouts that tested the height and power of the recon car. The headlights had gleamed from the surface of roadside ditches that were full to overflowing.

But now their more extended view showed that this water on the road was not a mere phenomenon of puddles and ditches, but spread across the country in interconnected channels and shallow lakes. Great blocks of fields were submerged sometimes on both sides of the road, so that the road was a mere causeway through the water, on occasion dipping below its surface for scores of feet at a time. Sometimes houses or trees thrust up above the surface of some far-flung sheet of water in desolate isolation.

This sight frightened Brand's companions badly, but he assured them that it could not be a result of the ocean's rising this high.

"That shallow lake we drove through about ten minutes ago was a plateau considerably higher than this valley we're driving through now," he said, "but we aren't driving through water here. It's just all that rain, coming down so heavy and so fast that it's saturated low places before the water can run off."

"Then we're actually still well above the ocean level?" asked Craig, exhibiting some relief.

"I didn't say that," replied Brand. "I don't know. It could be up so high by now that it'll block us in a particularly low valley, and it could be rising so fast that it'll catch up with us. All I can say is that this water we see out in the fields is not the ocean."

In this flooded countryside, Brand and his companions were in the position of the Ancient Mariner: they were thirsty. They could not take the chance of drinking the rain water from the pools and ditches.

Nor did they wish to stop and explore for food and water in any of the small towns, even those which obviously were not occupied by military units. The houses there might be, and probably were, occupied by refugees, desperate for a vehicle with gasoline in its tank and numerous enough not to be stopped by the two guns the small party possessed.

At last, however, they felt forced to take the risk. They chose a small crossroads community reminiscent of Cistern Springs. A glance at the single store as they passed through it discouraged them from trying there. All the windows and doors were smashed, and the rear third had been destroyed by fire. It probably had been looted thoroughly. Instead, they selected a house, rather isolated near the edge of the community, which appeared to be intact.

Brand and Ashley went in cautiously, Brand carrying the pistol, while Craig kept the rifle in the car in case anyone approached from any of the other houses down the road.

There was no one in the house, but the interior was a shambles. Furniture had been smashed, and the entire house had been turned topsy-turvy, apparently in search of food and valuables. In the kitchen, the refrigerator door hung open, and opened cans and broken bottles lay everywhere. The place stank of spoiled food.

"No luck here," said Brand. "At least, we can get some water in those buckets and take it along with us."

"How about there?" suggested Ashley, nodding his head toward an open door.

"That? That just goes to the basement."

"People in the country sometimes keep canned and preserved foods in the cellar," said Ashley. "Maybe the people who looted this place didn't know that."

They were in luck. In the basement, around a corner

where it would not have been seen from the stairs, were half a dozen shelves containing jars of canned beans, beets, tomatoes and other assorted vegetables and fruits. The two men filled a big pasteboard box with them and went back to the car.

There were enough jars to fill three such boxes. They took them all and drove on, eating from the jars with utensils confiscated from the kitchen as the car bumped over the broken pavement.

They drove most of the night again, and near morning were constrained to find another place to sleep for a while. Sleep was impossible for any of them in the jouncing recon car.

This time, no convenient abandoned barn presented itself. What did happen that made some prospect of sleep possible was that, for the first time in several days, it stopped raining completely. The clouds remained low over them, mist drifting through the valleys, but no rain fell.

Soon afterward, they came to a wood lot sloping up to the right of the road, a gentle hill dotted with large trees. Insofar as they could tell at night, there were no houses or other buildings anywhere near.

The slope was unfenced, and Brand drove the car across the shallow roadside ditch and well up the hill, stopping under one of the big trees. There was no foliage on the trees to shelter the ground below them from the rain, but the soil on the slope was light and porous, and the water had run off of it swiftly. They laid down blankets for sleeping with the assurance that they would stay reasonably dry unless it started raining again.

Brand was nearly exhausted from driving, so it was decided that Craig and then Camilla would stand watch, giving him an uninterrupted four hours of sleep.

Brand awoke suddenly, with the sound of a muffled scream in his ears. He raised up on his elbow and looked around him.

It was daylight. It had not started raining again, although the sky was still heavily overcast.

For a moment, he thought he must have been dreaming. Around him, rolled in their blankets and still sleeping, were Craig, Harriet and Chris.

He did not see either Ashley or Camilla immediately. As the meaning of this filtered through his sleep-clogged mind

and he scrambled to his feet, he caught sight of movement beyond a nearby tree, in the direction of the car.

He started in that direction at a swift pace, and then they emerged into his line of sight.

Ashley was dragging Camilla away toward the car, one hand over her mouth. She struggled frantically, clawing and kicking.

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How Ashley had caught Camilla off guard, Brand did not know. Perhaps she had dozed. The pistol was nowhere in sight.

"Hey!" yelled Brand, and started running.

Ashley looked up, saw him, scowled and redoubled his effort. They were nearly at the car.

But Camilla, grasping a bush, twisted and threw Ashley off balance. He released her, nearly falling.

Regaining his balance as Brand closed in, Ashley reached into his pocket hastily and pulled out the pistol.

He fired as Brand hit him with his shoulder. The bullet went wide. Ashley tumbled backward, Brand rolling free of him, and the pistol flew from Ashley's hand, landing several feet away.

They got to their feet at the same time. Brand moved quickly, placing himself between Ashley and the pistol.

"I knew you couldn't be trusted," growled Brand. "By the time I finish with you, you won't want to cause anyone any more trouble!"

He started toward Ashley. Backing slowly, Ashley fell into the same crouch that had foretold the Duke's defeat, his open hands tense and ready.

Brand kept moving, his blue eyes flashing with fury.

Suddenly Ashley broke and ran for the car. Then, looking over his shoulder and seeing Brand at his heels, he realized Brand could reach him before he could start the

engine. He veered and ran away down the slope toward the road, at top speed.

Brand stopped. A hundred feet away, Ashley stopped and turned, panting. His face was contorted. His spectacles hung awry, and the dark lock of hair hung lank over his forehead.

"I'll get you yet!" he shouted shrilly. "I'll win! You'll see, Caravel! I'll collect a tribe of men to follow me, and I'll catch up with you!"

He turned and strode off down the slope as Camilla came to Brand's side, the pistol in her hand. Brand put his arm around Camilla's waist, and she leaned her head on his shoulder. Together they watched Ashley reach the road and turn back eastward, trudging doggedly through the mud.

The other Blackthornes, awakened by the turmoil, came up.

"I think we'd better get on our way," said Brand soberly. "Ash has gone out of his mind. He can't organize any bunch of these refugees like the Duke did, and he may get killed if he tries it. But he's clever and he's fanatical, and if we don't get out of his range, he may find a weapon and sneak up on us."

They rolled up the blankets, got in the recon car and bumped down the slope to the road. They turned westward and made their way slowly through the increasingly flooded country.

"I'm afraid that's the ocean and not just the rain," said Brand, pointing down a long slope to their left. At its foot, water lay halfway up the tree trunks before the increasingly heavy mist cut off their view entirely. "We're climbing at an average rate of three and a half feet per mile on this plateau, but the land is sinking fast."

They drove as fast as the bumpy road would let them. Several times now the water came up over the tall car's floor as they drove through long low stretches, and Brand had to feel his way carefully to keep from running off the road.

It began to rain again.

They came to a long stretch where the road was high, well above water. The land rose to their right, to a ridge a few hundred feet from the road. To their left, it sloped downward until the trees marched down underwater and vanished beneath the unbroken expanse of inland sea.

Despite the rain, the fog was heavy, and getting heavier.

It shrouded the ridge above and to their right in a veil of damp mystery, it curled in wisps among the drowned trees to their left.

They rounded a curve and came suddenly upon a group of men, perhaps fifty of them, sitting and lying on the bank to the right of the road. Several of the men jumped up at their appearance, and others began getting to their feet more slowly. They were armed with fence posts, timbers, pitchforks, axes, kitchen knives.

Brand jammed down the acellerator, and the car roared past. Two of the men reached the side of the road and grabbed at it as it went by, despite its speed.

The car jolted and jounced down the road. Behind them, all the men were running after them, shouting, waving their weapons as they were left behind.

The rolling fog hid their pursuers at last. Brand slowed the car, peering ahead into the mist.

The road took a downward turn, and Brand braked the car as they came to water. He stopped it. He got out on the running board, and strained his eyes ahead.

Through the mist, he could see the trees along the sides of the road, going down, down, down, until, at the limit of visibility, only the tracery of their tops could be seen.

"The ocean's come in ahead of us, in that valley," he said. "We'll have to try to go up the ridge."

He turned the car to the right and nosed it into the roadside ditch. It eased down, then up . . . and stuck. Brand threw it into double low and revved the engine. The wheels spun deep ruts in the mud, and the car sank down. It did not move from the spot.

It would not move, either forward or backward.

Brand switched off the engine. Behind them came the sound of voices, carried eerily through the fog.

"We've got to go afoot!" he said desperately. "Maybe they won't follow us when they have the car."

They climbed out into the mud and rain, and clambered up the bank. They turned westward, stumbling over the broken ground until, again, they came to the water's edge.

Behind them, a shout went up as the men reached the car. Then there were sounds plainly indicating that some of them were climbing the bank and coming after the little group.

Slogging as fast as they could, Craig helping his wife and Brand assisting Camilla, they followed the water's edge.

Gradually, the shoreline swung northward, and then began to turn back eastward. They were going around the ridge.

The women could not move fast. Gradually, the voices behind them grew louder as the men searched for them through the thickening fog.

A figure loomed up in the mist and ran toward them. Brand fired the pistol, and the man pitched to the ground. But the sound of the shot raised a terrifying shout from many throats behind them, like the baying of wolves closing on their prey.

Suddenly, in the fog, in the water at the very shoreline, a great curved bulk loomed up ahead of them. It was moving slowly, very slowly along the shore, bumping against the larger trees and pushing the smaller ones aside, the water barely rippling at its base.

"The ark!" cried Brand. "It's the ark, washed off of Noah's Knob and drifted over here!"

He waded into the water, put his hands to his mouth and shouted up the curving side.

"Noah! Old Man Noah!"

A cavernous voice came down out of the fog.

"Who's there?"

"It's us, Noah, the Blackthornes and Brand Caravel! We were on the Knob with you when the wave hit! Can you get us aboard?"

The reply sounded very much as though Noah were chuckling.

"I told you you should stay with me," he said.

Then a rope ladder snaked down the side of the ark from the invisible deck above. Wading hip deep in the water, the refugees reached it and, helping each other, began to climb, one by one.

Harriet and Chris went first, then Camilla and Craig. Holding the pistol, facing back the way they had come, Brand clung to the bottom of the ladder as the others went up, wading along as the ark moved, deeper and deeper as the ark drifted gently away from the shore.

Myriad voices ashore were so loud now that they seemed at his shoulder. As he put his foot on the first rung of the rope ladder and began to climb, swaying, figures appeared in the fog and another great shout went up.

Waving their weapons, the men ran out into the water after him. Brand stopped on the ladder and fired once. One of them fell. The others stopped momentarily, then

came on, wading in and reaching for the ladder.

Brand reached the top, and hands helped him over the edge. The ladder below shook as the first men reached it and grabbed it.

As Brand tumbled to the deck, Noah swung an ax twice. The ladder tumbled into the water, far below, with a hollow splash.

Brand got to his feet and faced the bearded patriarch.

"Welcome, my children," said Noah. "Never fear. The Lord will take us to the mountains."

Brand looked at Camilla. She crept into his arms and turned her face up to his.

Together they turned and looked out into the fog, over the rising inland sea.

"I believe him," said Camilla in an awed tone. "The Lord brought him here, and the Lord will take us to the mountains."

"The water will go down again, as the ice refreezes at the poles," said Brand gravely, holding her warmth close to him. "Our children's children will live on the seashore where we were born."

Slowly, the ark drifted westward.

THE END

F 6/66

A WORLD DESTROYED

It was November, 1997, and the governments of the world had pooled their scientific resources to solve the population explosion. Their plan was to open up an entire new continent by slowly melting the polar regions with atomic heat.

The project had been in operation only a month when a sudden buildup occurred in the reaction. Before it could be checked the most massive hydrogen explosion the wo ever seen was set off.

Tidal waves 150 to 200 feet high swept over the Ear rential rains and earthquakes claimed millions; proper age was incalculable; refugees swarmed over the cou locusts, looting and killing in their quest for survival.

It was a world where only the most ruthless men cou out against the terrible flood that threatened extinctior whole human race.

P7-BQL-520

Published By MONARCH BOOKS, INC.

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